

Marcel Ray Duriez

Pretender

Interval: 1

Walking After You

Part: 1

I hesitate, filling my palm with sand, unwilling to do it. Unlike her, I know the price, the dire significances the slightest skin-on-skin contact can bring. Which is why I have been avoiding her touch altogether, and scenes last Saturday.

Which is why I have been avoiding her touch altogether.

But when I peer at her yet again, her palm out, waiting for mine ever so softly, I take a deep breath and lift my hand too- gasping when he draws so close the space that divides- us like a hair-thin.

‘Um- do you feel the sensation that?’ She smiles.

‘That tingle with the heat?’

‘That’s our energy linking- of bodies, minds, and souls.’

She moves her hand back and forth on my softly, employing the push and pull of the energy force sparking from me to her with a field bolt between us.

‘But if we are all linked as you say, then why doesn’t it all feel the same?’

Not like this was not, I have memories that they do not have, and well never-ever have.

I for one murmur, drawn by the undeniable charming stream that links us, causing the most wonderful warmth of course through my frame.

‘We are all linked, all of us made of the same vibrating source. Nonetheless, while some energy leaves you cold and some leaves you feeling like you are dying on the inside, the one that you are intended for? It feels just like this.’ I close my eyes and turn, allowing the tears to stream down my cheeks, no longer able to keep them in.

Knowing I am barred from the feel of her skin, the touch of her lips, the solid warm comfort of her body on mine.

This electrical energy field that trembles between you and me- like- is the closest I will get to feeling precious, thanks to the horrible decision I made I have never- ever felt real love.

‘Knowledge is just now catching up with what metaphysicians and the great spiritual instructors have known for eras.’

‘Everything is vigor energy of stamina. Everything is one with that- understand.’

‘Somehow some way we are all the same with the link.’

I can hear the smile in her voice as she draws closer, eager to entwine her fingers with mine.

But then again, I move away too swiftly...

-Then-

Emmah said- 'Pennsylvania was the first state to legalized witchcraft, that is why we're all mostly from those parts.'

Catching her eye just long enough to see, the look of hurt that across-ed her face- the same look she has been giving me since, I made her drink the antidote that returned her to life, and to feel all things like love- and all the feeling a teen girl should have as if she was alive.

Wondering why-why?

Why- I am acting so silent, noiseless, inaudible, still, and quiet.

So, aloof, so remote- rejecting to touch her when just a few weeks earlier, I could not get enough.

Erroneously assuming it is because of her hurtful behavior- she is flirting with Emmah, her cruelty toward me- when the truth is, it has nothing to do with that. She was under Naddalin's spell, the entire school was. It was not her fault.

What she does not know is that while the antidote returned her to life, the moment I added my blood to the mix it also ensured we could never- ever be together.

Never! Ever! For all of eternity!!!

'Ever?' She undertones, in her voice, that is too deep and sincere. But I cannot look at her. Cannot touch her; along with certainly cannot utter the words she deserves to hear- I messed up- I am so sorry- Jinger tricked me, and I was desperate and dumb enough to fall for her trick- Besides now there is no hope for us because, if you kiss me if

we exchange our DNA- you will die- I cannot do it. I am the worst kind of coward. I am pathetic and weak. And there is just no way I can find it within me.

‘Ever, please, what is it?’ she asks, alarmed by my tears.

‘You have been like theirs for days. Is it me?’

Is it something I have done?

Because you know I do not remember much of what happened, and the memories that are starting to surface, well, you must know by now that was not the real me.

I would never- ever- ever deliberately hurt you.

‘I’d never harm you in any way.’

I hug myself tightly, squeezing my shoulders, and bowing my heart.

Wishing I could make myself smaller, so small she could no longer see me. Knowing her words are true, that she is incapable of hurting me, only I could do something so hurtful, so rash, so ridiculously impulsive.

Only, I could be stupid enough to fall for Naddalin. So, eager to prove myself as Naddalin’s one true love- wanting to be the only one who could save her-and now look at the mess that I have made.

Then she moves toward me, sliding her arm around me, grasping my waist, and pulling me nearby. Nonetheless, I cannot risk the closeness, my tears are deadly now, and must be kept far from her skin.

I- Emmah then climbs to my feet and runs toward the water's edge, curling my toes at its edge and allowing the cold white froth to splash onto my shins, that is on the far end of the castle beach.

-And-

I wish I could dive under its incalculability and be carried by the tide.

Anything to avoid saying the words-anything to avoid telling my one true love, my eternal partner, my soul mate for the last four hundred years, that while she may have given me an eternity- I have brought us our end.

-Then-

I stay like that, silent and still and hushed. Waiting for the sun to sink until I finally turned to face her.

Taking in her dark shadowy outline- indistinguishable from the night, and speaking past the sting in my throat when I mumble...

'Naddalin... baby- girl... there's something- that, I need to tell you.'

Part: 2

I kneel beside her, hands on my knees, toes buried in black sand, wishing she would look at me, wishing she would say something.

Even if it is only to tell me what I already know- that I made a grave and stupid mistake-one that will never be erased.

I would gladly accept it, I deserve it. What I cannot stand is her absolute silence and daydreaming gaze.

Besides, I am about to say anything, something, to break the intolerable motionlessness tranquilities,' when she looks at me, with eyes so weary they are the perfect byword of her years.

‘Naddalin.’

She sighs, shaking her head. ‘I didn’t identify her; I had no idea-’ Her voice trails off along with her stare.

‘There’s no way you could’ve known,’ I say, eager to erase any guilt she might feel.

‘You were under her spell from the very first day. Believe me, she had it all planned, made sure any memories were completely erased.’

Her eyes search my face studying me closely before she stands and turns away. Gazing out at the water’s edge, hands balled into fists as she says, ‘Did she hurt you?’

‘Did she go after you or harm you in any way?’

I shake my head back and forth.

‘She didn’t have to; it was enough to hurt me through you.’

She turns, eyes growing darker as her features strengthen, inhaling deeply as she says, ‘This is all my fault.’

I gawk, conjecturing how she could have faith in that after the case I just made.

-And-

Rising to my feet and standing beside her as I cry, ‘Do not be ludicrous! Of course, it is not your fault!’

‘Did you listen to anything I said?’ I shake my head.

‘Naddalin poisoned your elixir and hypnotized you. You had nothing to do with it, you were just doing her bidding-it was beyond your control!’

Nonetheless, I have scarcely finished when she is already discharging it with a wave of her hand. ‘Ever, do not you see? The is not about Naddalin, or you, the is karma.

‘The is vengeance for centuries of selfish living.’

She then shakes her head and giggles, though it is not the kind that asks you to join in.

It is the other kind-the kind that chills you to the bone.

‘After all those years of loving you and losing you, repeatedly, I was sure that was my punishment for the way I had been living, having no idea you had died at Haven’s hand. But now I see the truth I have missed all along. Just when I was sure I had evaded karma by making you immortal and keeping you forever by my side, karma gets the last laugh, allowing us an eternity together, but only to look, never to touch each other again.’

I reach for her, wanting to hold her, comfort her, convince her that it is not at all true. But I pulled away just as quickly.

Remembering our inability to touch is the very thing that got us both here.

‘That’s not true,’ I say, gaze fixed on her. ‘Why would you be punished when I am the one who made the mistake?’

Don’t you see?’

I- Emmah shakes my head, irritated by her singular way of thinking.

‘Naddalin planned it all along. She loves Haven- I bet you did not know that, huh? She was one of the orphans you saved, and she loved her for all those tough times when she was like you, would have done anything for her.’

But Haven did not care about her- as she should, she only loved her-and her only, loved me-and then, well, after they killed her, Naddalin decided to go after me-only she did it through you.

Wanting me to feel the pain of never being able to touch you again-just as she feels with Haven!

-And-

It all happened so fast, I just-' I stop, knowing it is useless, a total waste of words. She stopped listening just after I started, convinced she was at fault for some of this- I knew- what I did not get was the hex causing all this.

Nonetheless, I refuse to even visit that place, and I will not let her either.

'Naddalin, please!'

'You can't just give up.'

The is not karma-it is me! I made a mistake, horrible, dreadful mistakes also.

But that does not mean we cannot fix it!

'See that was something I could never do is- FIX THING TO OTHER'S LIKING'S.'

There must be a way away.' Clinging to the falsest of hopes, forcing enthusiasm, I do not feel- THAT ANY LONGER.

Naddalin stands before me, a dark silhouette in the night, the warmth of her sad tired gaze serving as our only embrace.

'I never should've started,' she says.

‘Never should’ve made the tonic-should’ve let things take their expected path.’

‘Seriously, Ever, just look at the result-it’s brought nothing but pain!’

She shakes her head, her gaze so sad, so apologetic, my heart caves.

‘There’s still time for you though.’

You have your whole life ahead of you-an eternity where you can be anything you want to be, do anything you want to do.

But for me- she shrugs. ‘I am tainted. I think we can all see the result of my hundred years.’

‘Nope!’ My voice quivers as my lips tremble so seriously it spreads to my cheeks.

‘You do not get to walk away; you do not get to leave me once more! I spent the last month going through hell to save you. Besides, now that you are well, I am not about to give up. We are meant for each other, you said it yourself! We are just suffering a brief setback, that is all. Nonetheless, if we can just put our heads together, I know we will think of a way to...’

I stop, voice fading, seeing her already moved on, retreating to her bleak sorry world where- she is solely at fault for it all.

Besides, I know it is time to tell the rest of the story, the sorry, regretful parts I would prefer to leave out.

Maybe then she will see it without a dealt, then...

‘So-o, before you assume karma’s out to get you or whatever, you need to know something else, something I’m not accurately proud of, but still-’ ‘There is more,’ I say, swish ahead though I’ve no idea how to phrase what comes next.

I without delay take a deep breath...

-And-

Also, I tell her about my trips to Earth and my homeland and the town around-to me was the world, that magical dimension between the dimensions, where I learned how to go back to time and that given the choice between my family and her-I chose her-over them- yet that is getting hard for me to do.

Persuaded and influenced, I could one way or another restore the future I was sure had been stolen, and up till now it all amounted to be a lesson I already knew- that occasionally destiny lies just outside of our reach, and it is not graspable.

I swallow hard and stare at the black sand, reluctant to see Naddalin’s reaction when she considers the eyes of the one who betrayed her.

But then again, as an alternative of getting mad or upset like I thought, her environs me with the most beautiful glowing white light-a light so comforting, so forgiving, so pure- it is like the portal to my home -only better it is a connection of body, mind, and soul.

So-o, I close my eyes and surround her with light too, and when I open them again, we are wrapped in the most beautiful warm hazy glow.

‘You had no choice,’ she says, in a gentle voice with a very soothing gaze, doing everything she can to ease all my shame.

‘Unquestionably, you chose your family...’

It was the right thing to do....

I would have done the same given the choice... yet, do I HAVE THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE.

I nod, shining her light even brighter and tackling a telepathic embrace. Knowing it is not as comforting as the real thing but for now, it will do.

‘I know about your family, I know all, I saw it all-’ Her looks at me with eyes so dark and intense I force myself to go on.

‘You’re always so secretive about your past, where you came from, how you lived-and so one day, while I was in Hastings; I asked about you-and-well-your entire life story was revealed.’

I press my lips together and peer at her standing before me so silent and still.

Moaning as she gazes into my eyes and telepathically traces her fingers along the curve of my cheek-creating an image so deliberate, so tangible, it almost seems real.

‘I’m sorry,’ say says nit-picking, thumb mentally smoothing my chin.

‘I’m sorry,’ ‘I was so shut down and disinclined to share that, I reduced you to that. But then again, even though it happened a long time ago, it is still something I for one would rather not confer.’

I nod, having no intention of pushing it. Seeing her parents’ murder followed by years of abuse at the hands of the church is not a subject I intend to pursue.

‘But there’s more,’ I say, hoping I can restore a little hope by sharing something else, and that I learned.

‘When I was watching your life unfold, in the end, Naddalin had killed you.

Then even though that seemed meant to be, I still managed to save you.’

I look at her, sensing she is far from swaying and rushing ahead before I lose her completely.

‘I mean, yes, our fate is sometimes fixed and unvarying, but there are other times when it is shaped morally by the actions we take.

So, when I could not save my family by going back in time, it was only because that was destiny that could not be changed.

‘It’s beautiful... that you can change destiny.’

Or as Riley my pain in the butt little sisters, yet my best little friend too was all meant to be, then just a second before the second accident, that took them again... yet she never did say she loves me either.

‘Love not to be- for me- it was my destiny!’ Said, Emmah.

‘You can’t change the past; it just is more of the past remand it kills the future.’

‘Nonetheless, when I found myself right back here in Hastings, and I was able to save you, well, it evidences that the future isn’t always concrete, not everything is ruled solely by fate.’

‘Maybe so-o.’ She sighs, gazes fixed on me, and my fate.’

‘But then again you cannot escape karma, ever ...?... It is what it is ...?... It does not judge; it is neither good nor immoral like most people ponder.’

Naddalin- I heard them call me a baby rapper to my face, and there was nothing I could but stand there, hearing these lies day in and day out; like all the other lies, as well- that was just that nothing but lies.

Emmah- ‘It’s the result of all actions, positive and negative-a constant balancing of events-cause and effect-tit for tat-reaping and sowing-what goes around comes around.’

‘Look at Karly’s destiny- and what she did over not having a or education and did not want to work for \$2.00 an hour, a hamburger joint. So, all she had to do is make on a shit video of her, this is just one out of a hundred- I recall this one for \$20.00 - ‘teen masturbates & fucks her dildo’- saying the headline- (‘22-mins of me enjoying myself

deliciously. Watch me cum over and over with my toys. Adore my long legs, my small tits, and my bush while- I let myself go crazy thinking about you.’)

It had 3,555 views- and she made \$71,100 just with that... was it wrong some would say, yet what other choice did she have? Yet that makes her the bad girl- she is a girl after all-that showed that she was one- and had needs- and need the money more than modesty in a world that could give a flying shit about her- in any way.’ With one video, she has made \$6,000,000 in her short life, be the end days of it and money still has not made a destiny for her either. Said, Naddalin.

She shrugs her shoulders...

‘However, you phrase it, it’s the same in the end- is it not?’

Then... we are the bad ones out over- it is our destiny.

Emmah- ‘And as much as you would like to think otherwise, that is exactly what is happening here with you sometimes you just must ask if... God’s at are just screwing us.’

‘I have been there too...’

‘All actions cause a reaction, I pounder even now- still having faith, even if some days I faulted like a human that was deemed- less then human....’ Said Emmah.

‘By them...’ she said.

‘By them...’ Naddalin said.

Part: 3

She shakes her head...

‘And the is where to have my actions have brought me- either.’

‘Then again you need to ride 20 dicks before you find the right one if ever you do.’

‘Ture- true... that you do... both- girls felt unanimous- saying we have been hurt, so badly, that way we turned to girls, for love, girls well love always when boys are a macho asshole, that is just impressing their jackoff boyfriends!’

‘All the time, I told myself I turned you out of love-but now I see it was really out of self-interest- because I couldn’t be without you.’

‘You like this?’ She asks softly, her teeth nibbling my outer ear, and she starts to flex her thumb slowly, in, out, in, out... of me, her fingers still circling the fleshy lips that move about with her thumb, that connecting line linking as she pulled it away of wetness.

I close my eyes, trying to keep my breathing under control, trying to absorb the disordered, muddled sensations that her fingers are releasing on me, fire coursing through my body. I moan again.

‘You're so wet, so quickly.’

‘Open your mouth,’ she commands and thrusts his thumb in my mouth. My eyes fly open, blinking wildly.

‘Let me make cum for you!’

‘M-mm- you are my Oreo cookie, that I just have to spate and like out the creamy center.’

Her thumb presses on my tongue, and my mouth closes around her, sucking wildly on the beach. I am panting once more as I tug at her with my mouth, and it trails down and under my chin, I can taste the smooth, rich leather of her.

‘See how you taste,’ she breathes against my ear. ‘Suck down on me, the baby she said.’

I taste the saltiness on his thumb and the faint metallic tang of blood.

‘That’s why it is happening now.’

‘So, that’s it?’ I shake my head, hardly believing he is determined to give up so easily. ‘That is how it ends?’

You are just so dang sure you have been chased down by karma you do not even try to fight back?

‘What’s the use...?’ She said to Naddalin.

You came all the way just so we could be together, at last... and now that we are facing difficulty, you are not even going to try to walk with me down this path- hand in hand?’

‘Ever- and ever- never, letting go of ever- and forever- never.’

Her gaze is warm, loving, all- encircling like her hair and tightly squeezing arms, as they are falling around her as they fall together to the gold wheatgrass within the black sand, but it does nothing to stop the defeat in her voice, of worn-out yet want the love and touch of each other hands and bodies.

‘I’m sorry, but there are some things I just know.’

‘Yeah, well...’ I shake my head and gaze down at the ground they are laying on top of the tall grasses swaying in the breeze, burying my toes deep in the sand.

‘Just because you have a few centuries on me does not mean you get the last word. Because if we are truly together, if our lives, like our fate, are truly entwined, then you will realize she is not just happening to you, I am part of it too. And you do not get to walk away from it, you do not get to walk away from me! We must work together! There must be a way,’ I stop, body shaking, throat closed so tight, I can no longer speak. All I can do is stand there before her, silently urging her to join me in a fight I am not sure we can win.

‘I’ve no plans to leave you,’ she says, gaze filled with the longing of four hundred years. ‘I cannot leave you, ever. Believe me, I have tried. But in the end, I

always find my way back to your side. You are all I've ever wanted-all I have ever loved-but Ever-'

'No buts...' I shake my head, wishing I could hold her, touch her, press my body tightly against her. 'There must be away, cure. And together we will find it. I just know that we will. We have come too far to let Naddalin keep us apart. But I cannot do it alone. Not without your help. So please promise to me-promise you will try.'

She looks at me, her gaze luring me in. Closing her eyes as she fills the beach with so many tulips, the entire cove is bursting with waxy red petals atop green curving stems-the ultimate symbol of our undying love covering every square inch of sand.

Then she slips her arm through mine and leads me back to her car. Our skin is separated only by her supple black leather jacket and my organic cotton tee. Enough to spare the consequences of any accidental DNA exchange, but unable to temper the tingle and heart that pulsates between us.

'Never should have made the elixir-should have let things take their natural course.

Seriously, Ever, just look at the result-it is brought nothing but pain!'

Without delay now at that time she shakes her head, her gaze so sad, so remorseful, my heart caves.

'There's still time for you though.

You have your whole life ahead of you- an endlessness where you can be whatsoever you want to be, do anything you want to do. But for me- she shrugs at me like a young girl that she is. 'I am contaminated. I think we can all see the consequence of my hundred years.'

'No!' My voice quivers as my lips shake so-o badly it spreads to my cheeks.

'You do not get to walk away; you do not get to leave me again!

I spent last month going through hell to save you, and now that you are well, I am not about to give up.

We are meant for each other, you said it yourself to me many times!

We are just feeling a temporary setback, that is all.

Nonetheless, if we can just put our heads together, I know we will think of a way to... you and me.'

I stop, voice fading, seeing she previously moved on, withdrawing to her bleak sorry world where she solely to blame.

Then- I know it is time to tell the rest of the story, the sorry, regretful parts I would prefer to leave out. Maybe then she will see it differently, then-, and there... 'There's more,' I say, whistle ahead though I've no idea how to phrase what comes following.

‘So, before you assume karma is out to get you or whatever, you need to know something else, something I am not precisely proud of, but still- I take a deep breath... and hold it- letting it out slowly.

Besides, tell her about my trips back home there is that magical dimension, left out of my life for a while, and the space between the dimensions where I learned how to go back in time and that given the choice between my family and her- I chose her, I choose to be here.

Influenced I could somehow restore the future, I was sure I had been pilfered, and yet it all amounted to be a lesson I already knew: Occasionally destiny lies just outside of our range for girls like you and me.

I swallow hard and stare at the sand, reluctant to see Naddalin’s reaction when she looks into the eyes of the one who betrayed her.

So-o I close my eyes and surround her with light too, and when I open them again, we are wrapped in the most gorgeous warm hazy glow.

But then again, as an alternative of getting mad or upset... like I thought, she environs me with the loveliest glowing white light-a light so comforting, so magnanimous, so pure- it is like the portal to another world-only better- and we go there together.

‘You had no choice,’ she says, voice gentle, gaze soothing, doing everything she can to ease all my shame. ‘Of course, you chose your family. It was the right thing to do. I would have done the same given the choice.’

I nod, shining her light even brighter and tackling a telepathic embrace.

Knowing it is not as comforting as the real thing but for now, it will do.

‘I know about your family, I know everything, I saw it all-’ she looks at me with eyes so dark and intense, I force myself to endure. ‘You are always so secretive about your past, where you came from, how you lived-and so one day, while I back on Earth I found out your story and where you are really from... I did... I asked about you-and-well-your entire life story was revealed to me just by reading between the lines.’

I press my lips together and peer at her standing before me so silent and still. Exhaling as she gazes into my eyes and telepathically traces her fingers along the curve of my cheek-creating an image so deliberate, so palpable, it almost seems real.

Part: 4

‘I’m sorry,’ she says, thumb mentally smoothing my chin. ‘I am remorseful I was so shut down and unwilling to share, that I condensed you to that. However even though it happened a long time ago, it is still something I prefer not to discuss any further.’

I nod at her, having no intention of pushing it anymore. Seeing her parents’ homicide followed by years of abuse at the hands of the church is not a topic- I intend to pursue, over the pain that she had on the inside cover it all.

‘Nonetheless, there is more,’ I say, hoping I can reestablish a little hope by sharing something else that I learned.

‘When I was watching your life unfold, in the end, Naddalin had killed you. Nevertheless, even though that seemed fated to happen, I still managed to save you.’

I gaze at her, sensing she is far from convinced and rushing ahead before, I lose her entirely.

‘I mean, yes, our providence of destiny is sometimes fixed and unalterable, but there are other times when it is shaped purely by the actions we take.

So-o when I could not save my family by going back in time, it was only because it was a destiny that could not be changed.

Or as Riley said seconds before the second accident that took them again, ‘You cannot change the past, it just is.

Naddalin- ‘I knew a girl that did that over and over named Karly- and your right you can’t but you can go back to see what you have lost, by seeing what you gave up on be- maybe doing thing differently.’

‘Nonetheless, when I found myself right back here, and I was able to save you, well, it proves that the future isn’t always tangible, not everything is ruled solely by fate.’

‘Maybe so.’ Her sighs gaze fixed on mine. ‘But you cannot escape karma, Ever- and never.

It is what it is... No?

Yes?

Maybe?

It does not judge, it is neither good nor bad like most individuals are ‘So, that’s it?’ I shake my head, hardly believing she is determined to give up so easily. ‘That is how it ends? You are just so dang sure you have been chased down by karma you do not even try to fight back? You came all the way just so we could be together and now that we are facing an obstacle, you are not even going to try to scale the brick wall in our path?’

‘Ever-’ her gaze is warm, loving, all-encompassing, but it does nothing to cancel the defeat in her voice. ‘I’m sorry, but there are some things I just know.’

‘Yeah, well...’ I shake my head and gaze down at the ground, burying my toes deep in the sand. ‘Just because you have a few centuries on me does not mean you get the last word. Because if we are truly together, if our lives, like our fate, are truly entwined, then you will realize she is not just happening to you, I am part of it too.’

-And-

Like- you do not get to walk away from it you do not get to walk away from me! We must work together! There must be away-’ I stop, body shaking, throat closed so tight I can no longer speak. All I can do is stand there before her, silently urging her to join me in a fight I am not sure we can win.

‘I’ve no plans to leave you,’ she says, gaze filled with the longing of four hundred years. ‘I cannot leave you, ever. Believe me, I have tried. But in the end, I always find my way back to your side. You are all I’ve ever wanted-all I have ever loved-but Ever-’

‘No buts...’ I shake my head, wishing I could hold her, touch her, press my body tightly against her. ‘There must be away, cure. And together we will find it. I just know that we will. We have come too far to let Naddalin keep us apart. But I cannot do it alone. Not without your help. So please promise to me-promise you will try.’

She looks at me, her gaze luring me in...

Closing her eyes as she fills the beach with so many lilies, the entire cove is bursting with waxy pink petals atop green curving stems-the ultimate symbol of our undying love covering every square inch of sand.

Then she slips her arm through mine and leads me back to her car.

Our skin separated only by her supple uniform and my organic cotton tee that was underneath my whit loses fitting blouse, that is fluttering in the wind open, like my hair.

Enough to spare the penalties for any accidental DNA exchange, but unable to temper the tingle and heart that pulsates between us even then even though.

She shrugs... even so-o.

It is the result of all actions, a positive and negative-a constant balancing of events-cause and effect-tit for tat-reaping and sowing-what goes around comes around.’

‘Though you phrase it, it is the same in the end. Besides, as much as you would like to think otherwise, that is exactly what is happening here. Altogether actions cause a response.

‘All the time I told myself I turned you out of love-but now I see it was out of selfishness-for the reason that I could not be without you. That is why it is happening now.’

‘And the is where my actions have brought me.’ She- being Emmah shakes her head.

(Some time has passed)

‘Guess what?’

She gazes at me as she climbs to her knees looking down with her hair falling all around me, in the sand.

Her big eyes are wider than usual, cute baby face curving into a grin. ‘No, you know what? Do not guess...

I will just tell you because you are never going to believe it! You are never going to deduction!’

I smile, hearing her thoughts a few moments before she can speak to them, refraining from saying the wrong thing.

But I did say your good friend Naddalin, who actually- knows all and everything about me!

You and I dating- ‘I have known about the possibility for a few weeks, but it just became official last night, and I still cannot believe it!

Eight weeks in France you and I could spend, doing nothing but acting, eating, and stalking smoldering hot men... to yet know that she and I are even more perfect this some man, over the fact that we get each other, yet it is fun to play with boys.'

I glance at her as I back out of her drive. 'And Holt's good with all that?'

She looks at me. 'Faster, you know the drill. What happens in here stays in here.'

Walking down the street hand in hand... as girlfriends.

My thoughts drifting to Haven and Naddalin, wondering how many more immortal rogues are still out there, just waiting to show up in my mind over and over to terrorize me, no matter where I go.

Except when it does not, I feel the most fear- over knowing what next, by them.

'Anyway, I am leaving soon, just after school gets out.'

I did not want to say yet this is our last time to be together... I am moving on to a new life.

And I have so much to prepare between now and then!

'Seriously perfect.' I smile, and the best of it all. 'Congrats, on making it see what you lost.'

‘That is so cool. And well deserved I might add. I only wish I could go with you.’

And the moment I say it, I realize it is true, I am happy for her- yet I feel like I am losing yet another person in my life.

It would be so nice to escape all my problems and fly away from all of them and that what we did, wings soaring, to angels in flight at midnight- in starlight.

Besides, I miss hanging out with her, already.

Part: 5

The last few weeks when she and Haven (along with the rest of the school) were under Naddalin’s spell were some of the loneliest days of my life.

Not having Naddalin beside me was more than I could bear, but not having the care of my two best friends nearly sent me over the edge.

Nevertheless, she and Haven do not evoke any of that, neither of them does. Only Naddalin can access small bits and pieces, and what she recalls leaves her feeling guilty.

We stay in youth hostels, backpack around-how cool is this? Just the three of us, you know, you and Naddalin, Haven and I, and me and whoever...’

‘You and whoever... we meet along the way too?’ I glanced at her. ‘What’s that about?’

‘I’m a realist.’ She shrugs.

‘Oh, come on.’ I roll my eyes. ‘Since when?’

‘Since last night when I found out I’m going back home and starting over.’

Part: 6

She giggles, running a hand through her brown hair.

‘Listen, you all great and all, don’t get me wrong.’

But I am not fooling myself.

I am not pretending it is anything more than it is, am I? It is like we have an end date; you know- and it is just my time- to try over- I will see you again I promise? You guys are different, you are lifers.’

Let us see a show with a full three acts with a definite beginning, middle, and end. It is not like with you and Naddalin.

‘Lifers?’ I peer at her, shaking my head as I stop at a traffic light. ‘Sounds more like a prison term than a happily ever after- yet that is how girls like lives go.’

‘You know what I mean don’t you.’

She inspects her shape, turning her hot-pink nails the way and that. ‘It is just that you guys are so in tune with each other, so connected.

And I mean that literally by the way since you are always going at it.’

Not anymore, I swallow hard, waking fast the second the light turns from not showing the hand, crossing the intersection with a loud screech of wheels stopping for us to go to the walkway, and leaving a thick trail of rubber behind them.

But even after I sat still for a moment to think she was nowhere to be found. Besides, I am about to climb a wall in a panic, wondering where she could be, when she appears right beside me- and I blink- blink and blink once more, her hand in mine the whole time- I think I have blacked out a moment there. Refusing to slow until we ran into a parking lot, and I scan for Naddalin, who always seems to stare down danger more than us, in a second- she was next to me.

she asks, glancing at me and her, and slings her backpack over her shoulder.

Naddalin nods.

‘A hundred and ten euros.’ Naddalin laughs. ‘Don’t forget, it was fully customized and loaded with options.’ there looking at scooters.’

‘We could rent one... no?’ Said Emmah.

‘Yet that lest one girl out- no.’ Said Naddalin.

She stares at her eyes practically bugging out of her head, unable to understand how anyone could do such a thing-why anyone would do such a thing, as buy one.

Part: 7

(The next day)

‘Um, okay, so let me get the traditional one we could see a lot more- she said, ‘so-o you just woke up and decided-hurry, what the hell?’ ‘...And we have to look at the locals- and do as they do.’

‘We get you one- and in the same breath she said, Emmah and I will ride tandem.’

I think I will just dump my ridiculously expensive luxury scooter by the side of the road-WHERE JUST ANYONE CAN TAKE IT?’

Naddalin shrugs, saying ‘Pretty much’- with an attitude. ‘You have a lock...’ she said ‘...and the people around here are not like back home.’

‘Because in case you have not noticed,’ Emmah says, practically hyperventilating now.

‘Some of us are a little scooter deprived’ said, Haven, I just said today I would get you one- relax- even if just renting one.’

‘Some of us were born to parents so cruel and unusual they’re forced to rely on the kindness of friends for the rest of their lives, thank you truly, and yes I would take the gift- thanks!’

‘Sorry,’ Naddalin shrugs, about that- yet you did get all that you wanted and more. ‘Guess- I had not thought about that. Though if it makes you feel any better, it was all for a particularly worthy cause.’ (She gives double thumbs up! And a wide smile with her head turned to one side.)

And when she looks at me, eyes meeting mine in that way that she has, along with the usual wave of warmth, I get the horrible feeling that ditching the scooters is just the start of her plans, to get to know me better, walking is taking she thought...

‘How’d you get to school?’ I ask, just as we reach the front gate where Haven is waiting, took the train as you, and walked and walked...

‘She rode the train.’ Haven glances between us, she recently dyed, her bangs falling into her face, to make herself look Earthlier. ‘I kid you not. I would not have believed it either, but I saw it with my own eyes, she was classed as a girl forever.

Watched her climb right off that big steamer train, with all the other first-year students, dorks, retards, and rejects who that were all like us, unlike Naddalin, have no other choice but to ride.’ She shakes her head, saying do not say it like that- think it does not say it even if true.

‘And I was so shocked by the sight of it, I blinked a bunch of times just to make sure it was her. And then, when I still was not convinced, I snapped a pic on my cell and sent it to Josh who confirmed it.’ She holds it up for us to see.

I glance at Naddalin, wondering what she could- be up to, and that is when I notice she is ditched her usual cashmere sweater in place of a plain cotton tee, and how her designer jeans have been replaced with no-name plain pockets, her early look as she calls it.

Even the brown boots she is famous for have been swapped for girly rubber flip-flops.

And even though she does not need any of that dash and flash to look as incredibly beautiful as the first day we met the new low-key look just is not her- I thought.

Or at least not her- that I am so-o used to.

I mean, while Naddalin is incontrovertibly smart, kind, loving, and generous- she is also more than a tad colorful and otiose at times.

Always preoccupied with her clothes, her image in general- along with smarts.

Also, do not even try and pin her down on her exact date of birth, since for someone who chose to be immortal, she has a definite multi-layered hidden point of view about her age- to use she is always the same age as the young teen girl.

Nonetheless, even though I normally could not care less about the clothes she wears or her ride to school look either, when I look at her again, I get the horrible chink in my belly-an an unrelenting push, demanding my notice.

A definite warning that she is merely the beginning. That the sudden transformation goes deeper than some cost-cutting, altruistic, environmentally conscious agenda. No, she has something to do with last night. Something about being haunted by her karma. As she is convinced herself that giving up her most prized possessions will somehow balance it all out.

‘Shall we?’ She smiles, grasping my hand the second the bell rings, leading me away from Emmah and Haven who will spend the next three phases of their time texting back and forth, trying to decide what is up with Naddalin.

I look at her, her gloved covering hand in mine as we heard down the hall, whispering, ‘What is going on? What happened to your scooter?’

Three girls' hands and hands going down the sidewalk...

‘I already told you.’ she shrugs her hold body. ‘I do not need it. It is an unnecessary sympathy; I no longer care to indulge.’

She giggles, looking at me smiling. But when I do not join in, she sinkers more and shakes her head and says, ‘Do not look so serious.’

It is not a big deal. When I realized it was not something I needed, I drove it out to a depressed area and left it by the side of the road where someone could find it.’

I press my lips together and stare straight ahead, wishing I could climb inside her mind, and see the thoughts she keeps all to herself, find the underlying cause of what the is about.

Because- despite the way she looks at me, despite the dismissive shrug that she gives, nothing she is said makes the least bit of sense.

‘Well, that’s fine and all, I mean, if that’s what you need to do, then great, have fun.’ I shrug, fully convinced that it is not at all great, though knowing better than to say it aloud.

‘But just how are you planning to get around now that you have ditched your ride? I mean, in case you have not noticed, this is not back home where you can run around freely, you cannot get anywhere without having a motorbike.’

She looks at me, amused by my surge of lighter, which is not exactly the reaction I had prearranged. ‘What is wrong with the bus? It is free.’

I gape, shaking my head, hardly believing my ears. And since when do you worry about cost, Missy.

‘As some shallow, money-oriented, self-absorbed, buyer-driven slob?’

‘No!’ I cry, shaking my head and squeezing her hand.

I hope to convince her even though I did mean it- not being mean yet truthful. Only not in a bad way like she thinks or you even.

At one time, she had my old boyfriend appreciate the finer things in life kind of thing, and less in my girlfriend’s now she is the version of what I am looking for in that kind of way, even if a girl.

‘I just-’ I squint, wishing I could be even half as eloquent as her, but still forging ahead when I say, ‘I guess I just don’t get it.’ I shrug. ‘And what’s up with the glove?’ I raise her leather-clad hand to where we can see.

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ She shakes her head and pulls me toward the door.

But I just stay put, refusing to budge. Nothing is obvious... Nothing makes sense anymore.

She pauses, hand on the knob, more than a little hurt when she says, 'I thought it was a satisfactory solution for now. But you would prefer I not touch you at all?'

Not at all!

That is not what I intended!

Part: 8

(Back at school)

Switching to telepathy the moment some classmates approach, reminding her how hard it has been avoiding any skin-on-skin contact for the last three days.

Fantasizing, I had a cold when we both knew we did not get sick, and other ridiculous avoidance techniques that left me feeling deeply ashamed. It has been tortured, pure, and simple. To have a girlfriend so gorgeous, so sexy, so amazingly awesome-and to not be able to touch her-is the worst kind of agony.

'I mean, I know we can't risk any accidental palm sweat exchange or anything like that, but still, don't you think it looks kind of odd?' I whisper, the second we are alone again.

'I don't care about that.' Her gaze was open, sincere, and fixed right on mine. 'I do not care what other people think. I only care about you.'

She squeezes my fingers and opens the door with her mind, leading me right past Emmah and the other girls as we head for our desks.

And even though I have not seen her since Friday when she woke from Naddalin's spell, I am sure her hatred for me has not dampened a bit.

But while I am fully braced for her usual ploy of dropping her bag in my path to trip me-today she is too distracted by Naddalin's fresh look to play that tired old game.

Her unhurried gaze traveling the length of her, from her head to her toes, before starting all over again.

But just because she ignores me does not mean I can relax or trust that it is over. Because the truth is, it is never over with Emmah. She has made that abundantly clear. If anything, she is more charged up and vicious than ever making the little reprieve nothing more than the calm before the storm.

'Ignore her,' Naddalin whispers, scooting her desk so close the edges practically overlap.

Besides even though I nod as though I am, the truth is- I cannot. As much as I would love to pretend, she is invisible- I cannot do it.

She is in front of me now and I am completely obsessed. Peering into her thoughts, wanting to see what if anything happened between them.

Since even though I know Naddalin's responsible for all the flirting, and kissing, and cuddling, I had no choice but to watch.

Even though I know that Naddalin was completely deprived of free will, that does not change the fact that it happened- that Naddalin's lips pressed against her while her hands roamed her skin.

And even though I am sure it did not go any further than that, I would still feel a heck of a lot better, if I could just get some evidence to back up my theory.

And despite how crazy, hurtful, and completely masochistic it is- I will not stop until her memory gives, and every horrible, painful, excruciating detail is finally revealed.

I am about to delve deeper, travel to the very core of her brain, when Naddalin squeezes my hand and says, 'Ever, please. Stop torturing yourself.'

I have already told you, there is nothing to see.' I swallow hard, gaze fixed on the back of her head, watching her gossip with Jewell and Mireille, barely listening as she adds, 'It did not happen. It is not what you think.'

'I thought you couldn't remember?' I turn, overcome with shame the instant I see the pain in her eyes as she looks at me and shakes her head.

'Just trust me.' She sighs loudly. 'Or at least try to. Please?'

I inhaled deeply, gazing at her, wishing I could, knowing I should.

'Utterly, constantly. First, you could not get over the past hundred years of my dating, and now you are obsessed with last week?'

She knits her brow and leans closer, voice urgent, coaxing, as she adds, ‘I know that your feelings are unbelievably hurt. I do. But what has been done is done. I cannot go back; I cannot change it. Naddalin’s done the on purpose-you cannot let her win.’

I swallow hard, knowing she is right.

I am acting ridiculously, irrational, allowing myself to veer way off track.

Besides, Naddalin thinks, switching to telepathy now that our teacher, Mr. Robins, has arrived. You know it is meaningless. The only one I have ever loved is you. Isn’t that enough?

She brings her gloved thumb to my temple, gazing into my eyes as she shows me our history of all things enchanted, my many incarnations a seeing all the young servant girl in France, all daughter gorgeous girls reminded me of how lucky I was... it was nice to be back... eyes wide, I gape, never having seen that life before, I think back, in class and wonder.

Part: 9

But she just smiles, gazes growing warmer as she shows me the highlights of that time, a quick clip of the moment we met at a gallery opening in Amsterdam-our first kiss just outside of the gallery that very same night. Presenting only the most- Dadaistic moments and sparing my death, which always, inevitably, comes before we can progress.

-And-

After watching all those beautiful moments unfold, her unabashed love for me laid bare to see, I gaze into her eyes, answering her question when I think: Of course, it is enough. You have always been enough.

Then closing them in shame when I add: But am I enough for you?

Finally admitting the truth-my fear that she will soon tire of the gloved handholding, the telepathic embrace, and seek out the real thing in a normal girl with safe DNA.

She then nods, gloved fingers cupping my chin as she gathers me into a mental embrace so warm, so safe, so comforting, all my fears slip away.

Responding to the apology in my gaze as she leans forward, lips at my ear as she says, ‘Good. Now that that is settled, about Naddalin...’

As I make my way toward history class, I am wondering which will be worse-seeing Naddalin or Mr. Milley?

Because while I have not seen or spoken to either of them since last Friday when my entire world fell apart there is no doubt, I left them both on a strange note.

My last contact with Milley consisted of me going all sentimental and not only confiding my psychic powers-which is something I never do-but also encouraging her to date my aunt Sabine-which is something I am seriously beginning to regret.

And as awful as that was, it is only rivaled by my last moments with Naddalin when I aimed my fist at her navel chakra, determined not just to kill her but to obliterate

her. And I would have too-except for the fact that I totally choked, and she got away. And even though in retrospect that worked out for the best, I am still so angry with her, who is to say I will not try again?

But the truth is, I know I will not try again. Besides not just because Naddalin spent the whole of English class telepathically lecturing me on how revenge is never the answer, how karma is the only true justice system, and plenty more blah- blah- blah- like that-but mostly because it is not right.

Even though Naddalin tricked me in the very worst way, leaving me no reason to ever trust her again-I still do not have the right to kill her over it.

It will not solve my problem. Will not change a thing. Even though she is awful, evil, and everything that adds up to bad, I still do not have the right to-do that... She slithers up beside me, all blond tousled hair, water's edge blue eyes, and shiny white teeth relaxed stretching her strong, tanned arm across the classroom door, barring me from getting inside.

And that is all it takes.

But I will not... even if... even if...

I promised Naddalin I could get myself safely to and from class without resorting to that.

‘So, tell me, Ever, how was your weekend? Did you and Naddalin enjoy a nice reunion? Was her ability to survive you-by chance?’

I clenched my fists by my sides, visualizing how she would look like nothing more than a heap of designer clothes and a pile of dust, despite the vow of nonaggression I took.

She then nods, gazes fixed on mine, lowering her voice to a whisper as she adds, 'Not to worry though, you will not be alone for long.'

Once the proper mourning period ends, I will be happy to step in and fill up the void of her loss.'

I focus on my breath, keeping it slow and steady as I take in the strong, tan, muscular arm blocking my path, knowing all it would take is one well-placed karate chop to break it in half.

'Hell, even if you did manage to hold back and keep her alive, all you have to do is say the word, and I'm right by your side.' She grins, eyes grazing over me most intimately.

'But no need to answer too quickly or commit yourself yet. Take if you like, Because, Continually, I assure you, unlike Naddalin, I am a man who can wait. Besides, it is just a matter of time before you come looking for me anyway.'

'There's only one thing I want from you.'

I narrow my gaze until everything surrounding us blurs. 'And that's for you to leave me alone.' Herat rising to my cheeks as her gaze deepens to a leer.

‘Farid not, darling.’ She laughs, looking over me and shaking her head.

‘Trust me, you want way more than that. But not to worry, it is like I said, I will wait for as long as it takes.

It is Naddalin I am worried about. And you should worry too. From what I saw those last hundred years, she is an impatient man. Bit of a hedonist. I did not wait for much of anything as far as I could tell.’

I- Emmah, swallow hard and strive to keep calm, reminding myself not to fall for her bait. Naddalin has a knack for finding my weakness, my psychological strength, and many lives to exploit it.

‘Do not get me wrong, she has always been one to keep up entrances-wearing the armbands that are black and white stripes, appearing inconsolable at the wake-but trust me, Ever, the moss had not time to adhere to her shoe before she was back on the lurk.

Looking to drown her sorrows in whatever or should I say whomever-her could. And even though you prefer not to believe it, take it from someone who has been there all along. Naddalin waits for no one. And he certainly never waited for you.’

I take a deep breath, filling my head with words, music, mathematical equations stretching far beyond my skills, anything to drown out the words that are like prudently honed arrows aimed straight for my heart.

‘Yep.’

‘Saw it with my own eyes, I did!’

Smiling as she slips into a thick cockney pronunciation and backs out again.

‘Haven saw it too.

It broke her poor heart.

Willing to take her back no matter where she had been, no questions asked.

Though, unlike me-and, I am afraid, quite unlike you have not loved was unconditional. Which, let us face it, is something you would never do.’

‘That’s not true!’ I cried, voice hoarse, and very dry, as though it was the first time that I had used it all day- it was so bad.

‘I’ve had Naddalin since the moment we met-I-’ I stop, knowing I should not have started. It is useless to engage in the fight.

‘Sorry, darlin,’ but you are wrong. You have never- ever had Naddalin at all. A pure kiss here, a bit of sweaty handholding there-’ Her shrugs, gaze contemptuously.

‘Forever, you think some pathetic attempts at second base can satisfy an avaricious, self-absorbed, self-indulgent bloke like her? For four hundred years no less?’

Part: 10

I swallow hard, forcing a calm I do not own when I say, ‘That’s a lot further than you ever got with Haven.’

‘No thanks to you,’ he spits, harsh gaze on mine. ‘But it’s like I said, I’m a man who can wait.’

‘Naddalin is not.’

She shakes her head.

‘Shame you are so-o strongminded to play hard to get. You and I are a lot more alike than you think. Both of us are pining for someone we will never truly have-’

‘I could-’ I suck in my breath, not wanting her to know what only Naddalin and I know, that targeting an immortal’s weakest chakra, one of the body’s seven energy centers, is the quickest way to obliterate them.

‘I could kill you right now,’ I whisper, voice shaky, hands trembling, even though I promised Naddalin I would not do them, even though I know better.

‘Slug me in my sacral center, perhaps?’

‘You could what?’ She smiles at me, faces impending so close her breath chills my cheek.

I gape, wondering where she could’ve erudite that.

Nonetheless, she just giggles, shaking her head saying, ‘Do not forget, Liv, Naddalin was under my spell.

which means she told me everything, answered every question I am asked-including a good bit about you.’

She got me... Right where it counts. And do not think she does not know it.

I stand there, refusing to react, figured out to appear composed, unruffled-but it is too late.

‘No worries, Liv. ‘I am having far too much fun watching you squirm to attempt something like that.

Just a moment later- ‘I’ve no plans to go after you- she said.’

Besides, it will not be long ’til you are squirming beneath me.

Or even on top of me. Either will do.’ She laughs, her eyes on me, gazing at me in a way so knowing, so intimate, so deep, my stomach cannot help but have.

‘I will leave the details to you. But no matter how much you may want to, you will not go after me either. Mostly because I do have what you want. The cure for what you suffer from. I assure you of that, said Naddalin. You are just going to have to find a way to earn it, she also said. You are just going to have to show me how bad you want it.’

I gape, dry-mouthed and slack-jawed, remembering last Friday when Naddalin claimed the very same thing, to me saying that she likes owned me, and in a way, I am okay with that.

So-o distracted by Naddalin awakening- I forgot all about it ’til now- to have it type down as another chapter in the book of my life.

I- Emmah press my lips together as my gaze meets, she is... awe- my hope rising for the first time in days.

knowing it is just a matter of time until the antidote is mine. I just need to find a way to get it from her.

‘Oh, look at that.’ She grins. ‘Seems you forgot all about our date with destiny.’

Part: 11

She lifts her arm and I start to plow through, then she lowers it just as quickly, laughing as she locks me in place.

‘Deep breaths,’ her coos, lips grazing the edge of my ear, fingers sliding over my shoulder, leaving an icy cold wake in their path. ‘No need to panic. No need to get all spaz-ed out o’er.

I am sure that between us, we can come to some sort of mutual agreement, find a way to work something out.’

I narrow my gaze, disgusted by the price that she is set, words slow and cautious when I say, ‘Nothing you could ever say or do could convince me to sleep with you!’ just as Milley opens the door, allowing the entire class to overhear.

‘Whoa’ Naddalin smiles, hands raised in pretend admission of defeat as she backs into the room. ‘Who said anything about bumping’ ugliest, friend?’

She will throw her head back and laugh, allowing her creepy Ouroboric tattoo to flash in and out of view. 'I mean, not to disappoint you, darlin,' but if it is a good shag I am after, virgins about the last place I would look!'

I storm toward my desk, cheeks burning, gaze fixed on the floor, spending the next forty minutes cringing as my classmates burst into hysterics every time Naddalin directs a disgusting wet smooch sound my way, despite Milley's many tries to quiet them down.

-And-

The moment the bell rings, I make a run to the door. Frantic to get to Naddalin before Naddalin can convince Naddalin will push her too far and she will snap-an act neither of us can afford now that Naddalin holds the key.

Nonetheless- just as I turn the knob I hear, 'Ever? Got a minute?' Her mocking laughter trailing behind me as I turn toward Milley to see what she wants.

I pause, classmates piling up behind me, eager to get to the hall where they can follow Naddalin's lead and taunt me some more.

'I did it.' Her smiles, posture stiff, voice anxious, but still eager for me to know.

I shift uncomfortably, moving my bag from one shoulder to the next, wishing I had taken the time to learn remote viewing so I could keep an eye on the lunch tables and ensure Naddalin sticks to the plan.

‘I approached her- just like you told me to.’ She nods.

I squint, returning my focus to her, gut-churning as I begin to understand. I saw her the morning on the day had passed. We even talked for a while, and-’ she shrugs, gazes drifting away, obviously still very taken by the event. I stand before her, breathless, knowing I must stop it, whatever it takes before it gets out of hand.

‘And you were right. She is nice to me. I should not tell you, but we are having dinner tonight.’

I nod, numb, shell-shocked, the words glancing at me as I peer into her energy and watch it unfold in her head:

She is standing in line in the cafeteria’s massive hall with all its stained-glass windows and gothic feel of a castle, minding her own business until Milley approaches- causing her to turn and grant her a smile that’s- that’s- shamefully flirtatious!

Except that there is no shame at all. Those two could not have been happier. At least not on Sabine’s part. Nor Milley for that matter. No, shame is all mine.

That cannot happen. For too many reasons to mention the dinner can never take place. One of them being that she is not just my aunt, but my guardian, my caretaker, my only living relative in the entire world!

And another, even more urgent reason, is the fact that thanks to my pathetic, maudling, overly sentimental, ill-advised moment of weakness last Friday, Milley knows I am psychic while she does not!

I have gone to great lengths to keep my secret from her, and there is no way I am going to be out by my love-struck history teacher of enchanted.

But just as I am about to tell her that she absolutely cannot, under any circumstances whatsoever, take my aunt to dinner and reveal any information I might have accidentally admitted during a weak moment when I was sure I would never see her again, she clears her throat and says, ‘Anyway, you should get to lunch before it is too late. I did not mean to keep you the long, I just thought-’

‘Oh, no, it’s okay,’ I say. ‘I just-’

But she does not let me finish. Pushes me out the door as she waves me away, saying, ‘Go on now. To find your friends. I just thought I should thank you, that is all.’

When I get to the lunch table, I sit beside Naddalin, relieved to find everything as normal as any other day. Naddalin’s gloved hand squeezing my knee as I quickly scanned the campus, looking for Naddalin as she thought: she was gone.

Gone? I gape, hoping her means gone as in not around, as opposed to going as in a pile of dust.

But Naddalin just laughs, the smooth melodious sound reverberating from her head to mine. Not annihilated. I assure you. Just-absent-that is all. I drove off a few minutes ago with some guy I’ve never- ever seen before.

Did you talk...?

Did she try to invite you?

Naddalin shakes her head, her eyes peering into mine as I add: Good. Because we cannot afford to go after her no matter what! She has the antidote! She admitted it! This means all we must do now is find a way to- constantly. She frowns... You cannot believe her!

This is what Naddalin does. She lies and manipulates everyone around her. You must stay away from her- she is using you-her cannot be trusted- I just shake my head.

Part: 12

I can feel it.

The time is different. And I need Naddalin to feel it too. She is not lying- seriously-her said- Not even finishing the thought before Haven leans forward, eyes darting between us as she says, ‘Okay, that is it. Just what is going on here? Seriously, enough already.’

I turn, noticing how her friendly yellow aura beams in such sudden sharp contrast to the deliberate harshness of her all-black ensemble. Knowing she means no ill will though she is definitely- disturbed by us.

‘Completely, and entirely- It is like you guys have creepy way of communicating. Like twins speak or something. Only yours is silent. ...And eerier.’

I shrug and sit there with my lunch, going through the motions of unwrapping a sandwich, I've no plans to eat, figured out to hide just how alarmed her question has made me feel.

Knocking my knee against Naddalin's, telepathically urging her to step in and handle since I've no idea what to say.

'Don't pretend it's not happening.' Her eyes narrow in suspicion. 'I've been watching you guys for a while now, and it's starting to creep me out.'

'What's creeping you out?' She gazes up from her phone, but only for a moment before she is back to texting again.

'Those two.' She points to a short, black painted nail with a chunk of pink frosting stuck to its tip. 'I swear, they get stranger every day.'

Naddalin nods, setting down her phone as she takes a moment to look us over. 'Yeah, I have been meaning to mention that. You guys are weird.' She laughs.

'Oh, and the whole glove thing?' She shakes her head and purses her lips. Showing her hand looking all cracked with fishes and red. 'So not working for you,' I said jokingly.'

Haven frowns, annoyed by my joke when she is trying to be grave.

'Laugh all you want,' she says, gaze steady, unwavering. 'But something is up with those two. I may not know what, but I will figure it out. I will find the underlying cause of it. You will see- you will see.'

-And-

I am about to speak when Naddalin shakes her head and swirls her red drink, leaning toward Haven as she says, ‘Do not waste your time. It is not as sinister as you think.’

She then smiles, gazes fixed on me.

‘We’re practicing telepathy powers of mind-reading, that’s all.’

‘Attempting to read each other's minds in place of talking all the time.’

‘So, we stop getting in trouble in class over it took over the face we take over each other's bodies and movements too at times, a real headache for the professors.’

She snorts, causing me to squeeze my sandwich so hard the mayonnaise oozes out and squirts grossly out the backside. Gaping at my significant other who has just arbitrarily decided to break our number one rule- do not tell anyone who we are or what we can do! This is something we worked hard to do, looking at the library in the restricted section of dark magic.

Calming only slightly when Haven rolls her eyes and says, ‘Please. I am not an idiot.’

‘Wasn’t implying you were.’ Naddalin smiles. ‘It is quite real, I assure you. Would you like to try?’

I freeze, body solid, unmoving, as though seeing a disaster on the side of the road-only the disaster is me.

‘Close your eyes and think of a number between one and ten.’ She nods, sincere gaze meeting her. ‘Focus on that number with all of you might. See it in your mind as clearly as you can, and silently repeat the sound of it repeatedly, got it?’

She shrugs, brows merging as though in deep concentration. Though Choosing to concentrate on blue instead of a random number like Naddalin said.

All it takes is a glance at her aura, morphing into a dark deceitful green, and a brief- peeks- at her thoughts to see she is only pretending.

She was holding her ground as she rubs her chin and shakes her head, saying, I glance at them, ‘I do not seem to be getting anything. Are you sure you are thinking of a number between one and ten?’ Knowing she is baiting her, sure that her one in ten chances of hitting the right number works too much in her favor.

She nods, deepening her focus on a beautiful shade of pulsating blue.

‘Then we must have our wires a-crossed.’ She shrugs. ‘I’m not getting a number at all.’

‘Try me!’ Emmah abandons her phone, and her books and wand and leans toward Naddalin.

Eyes barely closed, thoughts hardly focused before Naddalin gasps, ‘You’re going to Haven?’

She shakes her head also.

Part: 13

(A week back)

‘Three... For your data, the number was three.’ She rolls her eyes and leers.

‘And everyone knows I am going to France. So nice try...’

‘Everyone but me,’ Naddalin says, jaws clenched, face gone suddenly pale.

‘Well, I am sure everyone has told you-you of all. You know, telepathically.’ she laughs, returning to her phone again, saying ‘sometimes old school kicking it is not the way to go anymore I prefer these,’ and she held up the phone, that links all the magical networks together.

I peer at Naddalin, wondering why he is so upset over the trip. I mean, yes, so she used to live there, at one time when she was alive- after her boyfriend passed away in an industrial accident or something like that- she was vague about did not want to say... all that much, she said she was in her late 20’s. she said something odd on her tombstone and it read- (I have not stuck with me all my whole life, so there-) and I got what it meant. Yet it said, ‘I will live on forever...’ or something like that, or ‘I don’t need you!’ - ‘Or even suck on that!’ Like- I thought that is what it may have said- but- but Nah- it can’t be- yet maybe?

...It is a cracked heart-shaped stone...

Part: 14

But- but that was hundreds of years ago, and the stone is crumbling and reads the rest has disintegrated to dust into just the wind!

I squeeze her hand, urging her to look at me, but she just stares at Haven with that same stricken look on her face.

~*~

‘Nice try with the whole telepathy angle,’ Haven says, swiping her finger across the top of her cupcake until it is coated with strawberry frosting, and she was licking her finger and kissing the end of it too.

‘But I am afraid you are going to have to try a little harder than that. All you have managed to prove is that you guys are even weirder than I thought. But no worries, I will find the underlying cause of it. I will expose your dirty little secret before long.’

I hold back a nervous laugh, hoping she is just messing around, then peering into her mind only to see that she is serious.

‘When are you leaving?’ Naddalin asks.

But only to appear conversational, has already uncovered the answer in her head.

‘Soon, but not soon enough,’ she thought, eyes lighting up, as she stared at her. ‘Let the countdown begin!’

Naddalin nods, gaze unstiffening as she says, ‘You will love this.’

Everyone loves it, France is a lovely, delightful place.'

'You've been...?'

...?...?

I and Haven both asked at the same time.

Naddalin nods- 'I's have,' gaze far away in the back of her on the mind and thought looking- blank to us looking at her color fading from her eyes. 'I lived there once a long time ago.'

'That's what we gathered...' they both said it unanimously!

Haven glances between us, eyes narrowed again when she says, 'Jaylynn and Naddalin lived there too, around the same time, she looks at her one eyelid squinting.'

Naddalin shrugs, expression noncommittal, as though the connection means nothing to her.

'Well, don't you think that is a little strange? All of you living there at the same time, in the same place, then all of you ending up here-within months of each other?' She leans toward her, abandoning her cupcake and letting it drop in search of some answers.

She just sips her blue drink and lifts her shoulders again, as though it is hardly worth going into, in the past she thought, to her, in through conversation.

But Naddalin's solid, refusing to cave or do anything that might give it away.

‘Is there anything I should see while I’m there?’ Haven asks, more to break the tension than anything else. ‘Anything that shouldn’t be missed?’

Naddalin squints, pretending to think, even though the answer comes quickly.

~*~

‘All of France is worth seeing... yes is it not?’

But you should check out the Ponte Vecchio, which is the first bridge to cross the Arno River and the only one left standing after the war- where every inch of Frances was covered in their blood.

Oh, and we must visit the Galleria dell’ Accademia which houses Michelangelo’s David among other important works, and the-’ ‘Definitely hitting David,’ Emmah says wanting this so badly.

‘We... yes, we’re taking you to a girl- surprise!’

‘We did not want to tell you.’

‘As well as the bridge, and the famous Il Duomo, and all the other items that make every travel guide top ten lists, but I am more absorbed in the smaller, off- the-beaten path kind of places- you know, where all the cool Florentines go.

Naddalin was raving about the one place, I forget the name, but it is supposed to house some incomprehensible revitalization artifacts, paintings, and stuff few people know about.

Did you get anything like that? Or even clubs, shopping, that?’

Naddalin looks at her, gaze so intense it sends a chill down my spine.

‘Nothing offhand,’ she says, trying to soften the look through her voice betrays a definite edge.

‘Though any place that claims to house great art but is not in the guidebook is a fake. The antiquities market is loaded with forgeries.

You should not waste your time on that when there are so many other, far more interesting things to see.’

Haven shrugs, bored by the conversation and already back to texting again.

‘Whatever,’ she mumbles, thumbs tapping quickly. ‘No worries. Naddalin said she would make me a list.’

(Back home)

‘I’m amazed by the progress you’ve made- Dariez.’ Naddalin smiles. ‘You learned all on your own?’

She nodded, and gazing around the small, empty room, pleased with me for the first time in weeks, when I walked into the tiny house.

The moment Naddalin mentioned she wanted to rid the place of all the overly slippery furniture, that was cheap she had filled it with during Naddalin’s reign of fear, I was on it, to make this place fit for to young lady’s- all cute and such.

Aiming at each piece with such unchecked enthusiasm that-well-I am not even sure where it went. All I know is it is no longer there I want to be-and she points at the old home she was half-grown in- and you were right.

‘Looks like you are no longer in need of my lessons. She shakes her head, saying you are wringing I need you more now than ever.’

‘Don’t be so sure.’ I said back quickly.

I turn, smiling as I push her dark wavy hair off her face with my newly gloved hand, hoping we will get that cure from Naddalin soon, or at least produce a less hockey alternative. Dariez a good kid... you will do fine.

‘I have no idea where all this stuff even went-not to mentioned, how I can’t possibly fill up space, even more, when I have no clue where I am stashing all the stuff you used to have and me before getting all this.’

Reaching for her hand a second too late and frowning as she walks over to the window- I feel as if I have lost my sister.

‘The furniture’-she gazes out at her manicured lawn, voice low and deep-’ is right back where it started, what seemed like forever ago, yet was only about a year.

‘I don’t like change-’ she said- out of breath.

Returned to its original state of pure vibrating energy with the potential to become anything at all. She looks in the glass ball- and sees her new life coming.

And as for the rest-' She shrugs, the strong lines of her shoulders rising ever so slightly before settling again. 'Well, it hardly matters anymore, does it? I do not need it now.'

I stare at her back, taking in her lean form, her casual stance. Doubting how she could be so-o blasé in reclaiming the precious artifacts of her past... -The pictures of her in the plain pink dresses back in the day, the astride a rearing white stallion-not to mention all the other amazing relics dating back centuries.

'Nonetheless, those objects are priceless, see her life now within mine forever! You must get them back, don't you? They can never be replaced, yet you can with new lives, can't you?'

'It's all energy!' She squeals.

~*~

'Ever so, relax. It is just stuff.' Her voice firmly resigned, as she turns toward me again. 'None of it has any real meaning. The only thing that means anything is you.'

And even though the sentiment is undeniably sweet and heartfelt, it does not affect me in the way that it should.

The only thing she seems to care about these days is apologizing for her karma and me. 'But that is where you are wrong. It is not just stuff- too.'

Oh, I sorry, I felt so bad hugging her from one side.

And while I am perfectly fine with those inhabiting the number one and two spots on her list, the problem is the rest of the page is blank.

I move toward her, voice wiles, wheedling, hoping to reach her and make her listen to the time.

And just like that, my mind is ripped into another time and place...

(Back into a week into the trip)

It is history for God's sake, we need to get books and have them signed, it was said this man write 30 books in one year, yet I am not sure if he was still alive! I so he would be over 90 now, you cannot just shrug it off as though it is nothing more than a box of old tired books, of tired old objects you donate to Goodwill, I thought they were worth remembering- like the one about a would lose without color or feeling, or the one about a girl that fought for her place, as an equal- the youngest over her class.'

Look at this thing, the covers are all tattered, and the pages small.

She then looks at me, gazes softening as she trails the tip of her gloved finger from my temple to my chin. 'I thought you hated my 'dusty old room' as you once called it.'

'People change, and so did I.' I shrug, thank about that asking why?

Wishing, not for the first time, that she would change back to the Naddalin, I knew before she was her-

‘And speaking of change, why are you so freaked by my ’s trip to France?’

Noting the way, she hardens at the mere mention of the word.

‘Is it because of the whole Haven and Nevaeh- become Naddalin thing of remembering the past- and not wanting to? The connection you do not want her to know about?’

Yet were there the good times- I do not know...? She thought...

She looks at me for a moment, lips parting, about to speak, then she turns away and mumbles insanely, ‘I’m hardly what you’d call freaked.’

‘You know what...?’

You are right.

For a normal person, that was hardly what you would call a freaked.

But for the girl who is always the coolest, calmest one in the room-all it takes is the slight narrowing of your eyes and the most minute clenching of your jaw to know you are upset.’

She sighs, eyes searching mine as she moves toward me again. ‘You saw what happened in France.’ She then squints. ‘Despite all its virtues, it’s also a place of unbearable memories, ones I’d rather not explore.’

I swallow hard shaking looking into her past- like a faded movie, remembering the images with her, I viewed in looking deep into her memories, lost in her mind, ‘like a

penny on the floor... worthless- my depression a sickness that keeps me, spring-like atop- my mind turning, my curse- or just my illusion? Until my death, until we part for better or for worse- locked in your heart-shaped box forever, I thought or was thinking to note but decillions, what little time we spent lost in my mind forever- whatever never mind.' - Naddalin is hiding in a small dark cupboard, watching as her parent was murdered, seeing it along with me, she and I shared recalling the moment, back when she was in her playpen.

By thugs' intent on obtaining the elixir-then later, abused as a ward of the church until the Black Plague swept through France and she encouraged Haven and the rest of the orphans to drink the immortal juice, hoping only to heal and having no idea it would grant eternal life-and I cannot help but feel like the world's worst girlfriend for bringing it up.

'I prefer to focus on the present.' She nods, gesturing around the large empty room. 'And right now, I need your help furnishing the space. I am starting to like a nice, clean, contemporary look when shopping for home decor.

-And-

Though- I was thinking of leaving it more than empty, to emphasize the size of the rooms- that is well very tiny, I suppose we should try-' I gasp, practically choking on the word as my voice raises several octaves at the end, think that this girl is now a woman!

‘I’m selling the house- in a year and moving on with my life.’ She shrugs. ‘I thought you would understand?’

But- you can your one of us now...

I gaze around, longing for that ancient velvet sofa with the lumpy cushions, knowing it would give the perfect landing for when my body with I am so tired I collapse, and my head quietly explodes, for all the chatter- that it must here and there are no ways of to turn them off- they just keep babbling in my mind. I need to have a real-life with real- real- things you no- like all thing that is really- REAL, like real friends too, not just the fantasy world that you refuse to see that is not a reality.

‘Do not look so upset. Nothing is changed It is just a house. A seriously under the oversized house, I need to move on from. And just like that she was gone and said OKAY if that is what you want Dariez... and Naddalin vanished right before her eyes. Nonetheless, I just stood there instead, determined to keep it together. Gazing at my ridiculously gorgeous girlfriend of the last years as though it was the first time we had met. Besides, I have needed all the space anyway, I have a new boyfriend, as you may or may not know, me and Stan are going to have a baby. there are never going to be enough rooms or rooms for three.’

‘And what exactly are you planning to replace it with, then? A tent?’

‘I just thought I’d move in with him, that’s all.’ Her gaze is pleading, begging me to understand, I did yet I thought she was throwing her new life away that I got for

her, 'Nothing sinister, Ever- yet a way of what could be power- and taking my place someday- ever one said the next. 'Nothing meant to hurt you, but I don't want it'

I did not say- yet I thought you are stuck with regardless, you are hexed, and at that point, I was out of her mind- for good- yet them- they were in it forever, and I was not going to stop it now.

I was studying her closely, wondering what had gotten into her, wanting to just say it was all over, and where they would end up without her- yet she said to me- he is looking for innocents and he has found it- so-o go-o.

'I mean, Naddalin, if you are seriously looking for a fight, I do not want it, why not just manifest something in your crazy head about how wrong I am and can go on?

I flick my gaze over her, moving from her glorious heart of longish dark glossy hair to her perfect rubber flip-flop-shod feet, remembering how, not so long ago, I longed to be normal again, just like everyone else. But now that I am getting used to my powers, I do not see the point.

'What's this really about- I thought?' I squint, feeling more than a little betrayed.'

'I mean, you're the one who got me here.' Oh, I was- mortified.

You are the one who made me the- way- I am.

Right- and now that I am finally adjusted, you decide to jump ship?

‘Seriously! Why are you doing it?’

But instead of answering, she just closes her eyes.

Projecting an image of the two of us laughing and happy, frolicking on a beautiful, black-sand beach- remember all the good times. Saying this is it... thanks for the memories. But I just shake my head and cross my arms tighter, refusing to play until my questions are answered, about her and them...

She sighs and stares out the window of the tiny home for the last time looking back at me with the sun shining brightly, then turning toward me when she says, ‘I have already told you, my only recourse, my only way out of the hell making- as I should have, it all karma- and I want what I lost.

And the only way to do that is to relinquish the manifesting, the high life, the big-spending, and all the other extravagances- I have indulged myself in for the last hundred years, so I can live the life of an ordinary citizen, too. I understand, Honest, hardworking, and humble, with the same day-to-day struggles as anyone else- if not more- go for it.’

Intermission-

Your times are limited, so do not be it... living someone else's life, that is what my tombstone said along with 1991 to 2094, I have seen a century- yet stayed the age of 14, all those days after my ending.

~Emmah~

Part: 15

Portion: 1

I stared at her, replaying her words in my head, hardly believing what I had just heard. ‘And how exactly are you planning to do that?’ I squint. ‘Seriously. In your one century of living, have you ever even held a real job?’

But even though I am dead sober and not at all joking, she throws her head back and laughs like I was.

Eventually calming down enough to say, ‘You reliably think no one will hire me?’

‘I could have had a job if I wanted to but, back home how- and when could I have- you’re working for a town that thinks your less then they, in every way you could think of, the kids you work with don’t like you and their dad that is now your boss thinks you’re a waste of life; so, get a job- yah-right.’

She shakes her head and laughs even harder. ‘Forever, please. Don’t you think I have been around long enough to have improved a few skills?’

~*~

I start to respond, wanting to explain that while it is truly remarkable to watch her paint, better than Picasso with one hand while at the same time outdoing Van Gogh with the other by cutting... I do not think that will help her land that coveted barista position at the Starbucks on the corner, yet something about girls well never changes, just

like every girl has that one boy that is her bitch, and I get that I had mine and she now has hers... so-o!

Nonetheless, before I can say it, she is standing beside me, moving with such speed and grace all I can manage is, 'Well, for someone who's turned her back on her gifts, you still move fast, for a girl that doesn't want to see any more of her past even if it's showing in the painting.'

Aware of that warm wonderful tingle swarming- turning and swimming like within my skin as she slips her arms around my waist and pulls me close to her chest, carefully circumventing skin-on-skin contact, yet it could not be helped.

-And-

'Besides what about telepathy?'

I murmur.

Thinking- Your mind spends about 70% of its time replaying memories and creating scenarios of perfect moments. Waiting- like a painting- is linked to depression, at times- and shows the picture within. Time spent waiting for something that may never happen is mentally painful. The best feeling in the world is knowing that you mean something to someone. This can add years to your life. Sometimes- good people make bad choices. It does not mean they are bad people; it means they are human. Yet we are not human.

Then the talking started up-

‘Are you planning to ditch that too- for your B*TCH?’

So, overcome by her juxtaposition, I can barely eke out the words.

‘I’ve no plans to ditch anything that brings me closer to you,’ she says, gaze on mine, steady and still.

‘As for the rest-’ SHE- shrugs, glancing around the large space before finding me again. And ‘tell me, what matters more, NEVER- Ever? The size of my house or the size of my heart?’

I bite my lip and advert my gaze; the truth of her words left me feeling small and ashamed- like first time sex- when your 13 and can now consent.

I swallow hard, focusing on anything but her, thinking back on my life and all the flashbacks that come.

It is not that I care about her past, I mean, if I want those things then fine, I will just clear them myself. An instant mood changes from happy to sad usually shows that you are missing someone, I have noticed...

Even so then again even though they are not important- THERE LIKE- JUST- moments lost in time, if I am going, to be honest, then I must admit they were part of the preliminary attraction-adding to her sleek, shiny, mysterious persona, that lured me in right away. Then when I finally am held at her again, standing before me, stripped bare of all the usual dazzle and flash, honed down to the very essence of who SHE is, I realize she is still the same, warm, wonderful girl that he has been all along.

Which just proves her point even more. None of that other stuff matters. None of it has anything to do with her soul at all.

I smile, suddenly remembering the one place where we can be together-safe and secure and protected from harm.

Reaching for her gloved hand as I grasp it in mine, saying, ‘Come on, I want to show you something,’ and pulling her along.

At first, I was concerned she would refuse to visit a place that not only requires a certain amount of magic for entry, but that is nothing but magic once you arrive.

Formerly just after landing in that vast sweet-smelling field, she wipes the BUTT off her jeans and offers her hand, gazing all around as SHE says, ‘Wow, I don’t think I was ever able to make the portal so-o quickly.’

‘Please, you’re the one who taught me.’

I smile, gazing at the meadow of pulsating flowers and shivering trees, noting how everything here is reduced to its absolute purest form of beauty and energy.

I tilt my head back, closing my eyes against the warm hazy glow that she makes with me within the shimmering mist of the day.

Remembering the last time, I was here, how I danced with a manifest Naddalin in the very same field, delaying the moment when I would have to let go.

~*~

‘So, you’re okay with being here?’ I ask, unsure just how far the ban on magic outspreads. ‘You’re not mad?’ I WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT SHE IS comfortable!

She then shakes her head and takes my hand.

‘I never grow tired of seeing THIS world WITH ITS UNWORLDLY COLORS AND CREATURES.’

It is a display of loveliness and potential in its unadulterated form.’

We make our way through the pasture, sustained by the grass just under our feet as our fingers graze the tops of golden wildflowers, that bend and sway alongside us.

Knowing anything is possible in a wonderful place, anything at all, including just maybe-us.

‘I missed them... everything...’

She leers, gazing all around...

‘Not that I reminisce about the last few weeks without it, even still, it seems like such a long time since we were last here- just like this.’

‘It felt strange coming without you,’ I say, leading her toward a beautiful Balinese-style bathhouse balanced beside the blue-green tinted stream.

‘Though I did discover a whole other side I cannot wait to show you. Only later- not now.’

I push the gossamer pink fabric aside and plop onto the soft white cushions, smiling as Naddalin lands right beside me, the two of us lying side by side, gazing up at the decoratively carved coconut beams.

Heads together, the soles of our feet just a few inches shy-the results of my elixir-fueled growth spurt.

‘What is the...?’

She turns onto her side...

And then I draw the curtains closer with my mind to me and her. Keen to shut out all those environs she and I, so-o we can enjoy our own private space.

‘I saw one on the cover of a travel magazine featuring some exotic resort, and I liked it so much I thought I would appear in one. You know, so we could hang out-and-stuff.’

I prevent my gaze, heart racing, face blushing, knowing I am quite possibly the most pathetic seducer she has met in her one hundred years.

Nonetheless, she just giggles, pulling me so close we just nearly touch.

Separated only by the slimmest veil of shimmering energy, a pulsating screen that hovers between us- allowing us to be near without harming each other.

I close my eyes, surrendering to the wave of warmth and tingle as our bodies come together. Two hearts pumping in perfect unison, reaching, and retreating, expanding, and retracting, the tempo perfectly synchronized as though beating as one.

Everything about it feels so good, so natural, so right, I snuggle closer. Nestling my face in the hollow where her shoulder meets her neck, longing to taste her sweet skin and inhale her warm perfumed scent.

A low moan absconding from deep in her throat as I close my eyes and press into her hips, my tongue tipped toward her skin, only to have her spring from my reach so fast I am met with a mouthful of the cushion.

I scrambled upright, seeing her move so quickly she is reduced to a blur. Stopping only when she is safely ensconced on the other side of the curtain, eyes blazing, body trembling, as I beg her to tell me what occurred.

I moved near her, wanting to aid.

But then again, just as I get close, she moves, yet, again handheld before her, observation cautioning me away.

‘Don’t touch me,’ she says. ‘Please, stay right where you are. Do not come any closer.’

‘But why?’

My voice is hoarse, uneven, hands trembling by my side as if I were feeling my old ways and old life- AS it was when I was getting older- not a young girl any longer.

‘Did I do something where I was mistaken in doing so?’

I just thought-well-since we are here-and since nothing bad can happen-I just thought it would be okay- if we tried to- re-kindle in reconciliations.’

‘Never- Ever, it’s not that it was-’ she shakes her head, her eyes darker than I have ever seen them- for being sky blue.

So dark the irises are indistinguishable from the pupils, blending right in. ‘And who says nothing bad can happen here?’ Her tone so edgy, gaze so harsh, it is clear she has traveled an exceptionally long way from her usual state of infallible calm.

I swallowed hard and stared at the ground, feeling foolish, ridiculous to think I was so desperate to be with my girlfriend, I risked taking her life- if I do- if they know- if they...

-And-

‘I just assumed...’

‘I’m sorry.’

My voice fades, knowing very well what happens when one assumes. I do not know what to say.’ Not only do you make an ass out of you and me, but in that case, that very same you just might end up dead for the final time with no more lives given to you.

‘I-I guess that- I did not think it through and then I shake my head, knowing it is completely insufficient considering the life-and-death circumstances we are in.

I mean, if we are not safe here, then where? I pull my shoulders in, wrapping my arms around my waist, trying to make myself smaller, so small I will disappear from her sight.

And yet, I cannot help but wonder precisely what kind of sad thing could happen in a place where magic comes easily, and wounds are healed promptly.

Naddalin looks at me, answering the thought in my head when she says, ‘School contains the possibility of all things. So far, we have only understood something clearly at last, but who is to say there is not a dark side? It is not at all what we think.’

I gaze at her, remembering when I first met Neville and Rayne and how they said something similar. Watching as she manifests a beautifully carved wood bench, then motions for me to sit.

‘Come,’ she nods, urging me toward her as I take a seat at the far end, not wanting to get too close and risk setting her off again.

‘There is something you need to see something you need to understand. So please just close your eyes and clear your mind of any random thoughts and clutter as

best you can. Keeping yourself open and receptive to any visions I send. Can you do that?’

I nod...

My eyes shut tight...

I was doing my best to sweep my mind of such thoughts as- What is going on I thought and thought more pondering? Is she mad at me- or just mad?

Unquestionably, she is mad at me- I know it!

How could I be so stupid? But how mad is she beyond? Is it possible to change her mind and start over again? My usual paranoid play-list is set on permanent repeat.

But even after clearing it out and waiting for what feels like a reasonable amount of time, all I have gotten so far is a heavy void of dense solid black.

‘I don’t get it,’ I say, opening one eye, and peeking at her.

Nonetheless, she just shakes her head, eyes shut tight, brows merged in concentration, as she endures to focus with all her might.

‘Listen,’ she says at once.

‘And look deep down inside.’

‘Just close your eyes and obtain.’

I take a deep breath and try again, but still, all I get is a foreboding silence and the feeling of black space.

‘Um, I’m sorry,’ I aware, not wanting to upset her but sure that I am missing the point.

‘I’m not getting much of anything other than silence and darkness.’

‘Faithfully,’ she whispers, unfazed by my words. ‘Now please, take hold of my hand and go deeper, delve past the surface using all your senses, then tell me what you see.’

I take a deep breath and do as she ask me to do, reaching for her hand, and pushing past the solid wall of the dark.

...But all- I get is more of the same.

Pending-

While waiting for-

I am sucked into a black hole, limbs flailing, unable to stop or slow down. Free-falling into the darkness, my horrible high-pitched scream was the only sound.

And just as I am sure that fall has no end-it stops. The Shriek... The fall... It... all.

Everything...

Leaving me to hang there, released, and suspended. Completely alone in a solitary place with no beginning or end.

Lost in the dark and dismal abyss with no trace of light coming in. Abandoned in the infinite void, a lost and lonely world of permanent midnight. The horrifying comprehension slowly dawning on me- this is where I live now.

Hell, with no escape...!

-Then-

I try to run, scream, cry for help but it is no use.

I am frozen, paralyzed, unable to speak completely alone for all of infinite.

Expressly held apart from everything I know and love-cut off from everything that exists.

Knowing I've no choice but to surrender as my mind goes blank and my body limps.

There is no use in fighting when no one can save me.

I stay like that, solitary, eternal, a shadowy awareness creeping upon me, tugging from a place just outside of my reach-

'Till-

Pending-

I am tugged out of that hell and into Naddalin's arms, relieved to see her beautiful, anxious face hovering over me.

'I'm so sorry I thought I'd lost you-I thought you'd never come back!' She cries, holding me tight, her voice like a sob in my ear.

I cling to her, body shaking, her art racing, clothes drenched with sweat. Never have I felt so isolated before-so disconnected from everything. From every-living-thing. Hugging her tighter, unwilling to let go, my mind connecting with her, asking why she chose to put me through that.

She pulls away, cupping my face in her hands as her eyes search mine. 'I am sorry. I was not trying to punish you, or harm you in any way. I only wanted to show you something, something you needed to experience firsthand to understand.'

I nod, not trusting my voice. Still shaken by an experience so awful it felt like the death of my soul.

'My God!' Her eyes widened. 'That is, it! That is exactly what it is. The soul ceases to exist!'

'I don't understand,' I say, voice hoarse, shaky. 'What was that horrible place?'

She looks away, fingers squeezing mine when she says, 'The future, the eternal abyss I'd thought was meant only for me that I'd hoped was meant only for me...' She

closes her eyes and shakes her head. ‘But now I know better. Now I know that if you are not careful, extremely careful-you will go there too.’

I look at her, starting to speak, but she cuts me off before- I can get to the words. ‘The past few days I’ve been getting these flashes- glimpses, really- of various moments from my past-both distant and near.’ She looks at me, carefully searching my face.

‘But the moment we came here-’ Her gestures around. ‘It started trickling back, slowly at first until it all came surging forth, including the moments I was under Naddalin’s control.

I also relived my death. Those few brief moments after you broke through the circle before you had me drink the antidote, as you know, I was dying. I watched my entire life flash before me, a hundred years of unchecked vanity, narcissism, selfishness, and greed.

Like an endless reel of all my actions, every misdeed that I had made was accompanied by the impact I had on the mental and physical effect of my mistreatment of others.

And though there were a few decent acts here and there, the majority, well, amounted to centuries of me focusing on nothing but my self-interest, giving extraordinarily little thought to anything or anyone else. Focusing solely on the physical world to the detriment of my soul. Leaving me no doubt I was right all along, my karma to blame for what we are going through now.’

She shakes her head and meets my gaze with such unflinching honesty- I want to reach out and touch her, hold her, tell her it will all be okay. But instead, I stay put, sensing there is more, and it is about to get worse.

‘Then, now of my death, instead of coming here-’ Her voice cracks but she forces herself to continue. ‘I-I went to a place the exact opposite of them.

A place so dark and cold it is more like a home than I wanted it to be or thought it could be. Experiencing the same thing you just did. Solitary, suspended, alone left to stay that way for all eternity.’ She looks at me, wanting me to understand. ‘It was exactly like you felt. It was as though I was isolated, soulless-with no connection to anything or anyone else.’

I stared into her eyes, an ominous chill blanketing my skin, never having seen her so tired, so jaded, so regretful before.

‘And now I understand the very thing that’s escaped me all these years-’

I pull my knees to my chest, shielding myself from whatever comes next.

‘Only our physical bodies are immortal. Our souls are most certainly not.’

I avert my gaze, unable to look at her, unable to breathe.

‘The is the future you are facing. The one I have granted you, if, God forbid, anything should happen, that is.’

My fingers instinctively fly to my throat, remembering what Naddalin said about my compromised chakra, my lack of discernment and weakness, wondering if there is some way to guard it. ‘But how can, you be sure?’ I look at her as though caught in a dream, some horrible nightmare with no way to escape.

‘I mean, there is a good chance you are wrong since it happened so fast. So that was just a temporary state. You know, as I brought you back to life so fast you did not have time to make the trip here.’

She shakes her head, her gaze meeting mine when she says, ‘tell me, Ever, what did you see when you died? How did you spend those few moments between the time when your soul left your body, and I returned you to life?’

I swallow hard and look away, gazing at the trees, the flowers, the crystal-clear stream flowing nearby-remembering that day I found myself in the very same field.

So, taken by its heady fragrance, its shimmering mist, the all-encompassing feel of unconditional love, I was tempted to linger forever, never wanting to leave.

‘The reason you did not see the abyss is that you were still mortal. You had died a mortal’s death. Nevertheless, the moment I had you drink from the elixir, granting you an infinite life, everything changed. Instead of eternity in School or the place beyond the bridge-the Shadowland became your fate.’

She shakes her head and looks away, so deeply mired in her private world of regret I am afraid I will never reach her again. But just as quickly her eyes meet mine when she says, ‘We can live an eternity in the earth plane, you, and I together. But if

something should happen, if one of us should die-' she shakes her head. 'The abyss is where we'll go, and we'll never see each other again.'

I start to speak, desperate to refute it, tell her here is wrong, but I cannot. It is of no use. All I must do was look into her eyes to see the truth.

'And as much as I believe in the powerful heralding magic of the place-just look at the way it heralded my memory-' she shrugs and shakes her head.

'I cannot afford to give in, no matter how safe my desire for you may seem. It is too risky. Besides we've no impervious it will be any different here than on the earth plane. It is a gamble I cannot afford to take. Not when I need to do everything I can to keep you safe.'

'Keep me innocuous?' I gape hard. 'You are the one who needs saving! It is my fault all the happened in the first place! If I had not-'

'Always, please,' she says, voice harsh, willing me to listen.

'You are in no way to blame. When I think about the way I've lived-the things I have done-' She shakes her head. 'I deserve nothing better, and if there was any inquiry that my karma was to blame, well, it ends here.'

I have spent the better part of hundred years devoting myself to physical pleasure and neglecting my soul-and the is the result-the wake-up call, and inopportunely, I have dragged you along.

So-o makes no mistake, my concern is for you, and you are only. You are my only priority. My life is only important in that- I stay well long enough to protect you from Naddalin and whoever else she might hurt. And that means we can never be together. Never. It is a risk we cannot take.'

I turn toward the stream, a thousand thoughts storming my brain. Besides, even though I heard everything she just said, even though I qualified the gorge for myself, I still would not change what I am.

'And the other orphans?'

I whispered, remembering how I counted seven, including Naddalin at one point. 'What happened to them? Do you know if they turned evil like Naddalin and Haven?'

Naddalin shrugs, rising from the bench and pacing before me. 'I always assumed they were too old and feeble by now to ever pose a real threat.

That is what happens after the first one hundred years- you age- some yet slower than the rest. And the only way to reverse the process is to drink the tonic again if you want an end.

Haven amassed it while we were dating and slipped it to Naddalin who eventually learned how to make her own and then passed it to the other.' She then shakes her head more.

‘So that’s where Haven is now,’ I whimper, overcome with remorse when I realize the truth. No matter how evil she was, she did not deserve that. Nobody does. ‘I sent her here-and-now she’s-’ I shake my head, unable to finish.

‘It wasn’t you who did it, it was me.’

She fills the space beside me, sitting so close there is only a sliver of energy pulsating between us.

‘The moment I made her an immortal, I sealed her fate.’

I was not sure if she wanted it or not, yet it was for the best I thought and for my selfishness.

‘Just like I did yours.’

I swallow hard, reassured by her warmth along with her wanting to assure me that- I am truly not responsible for sending my number-one enemy through all my lives straight into that hell.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she whispers, gazes full of remorse.

‘I am sorry- I complicated you in any of them. I should have left you alone should have walked a long time ago. You would have been so much better off if you had never met me-’

I shake my head, unwilling to even visit that place, it is far too late for looking back or second-guessing. ‘But if we’re destined to be together-then maybe she is our fate.’ Knowing her stays unconvinced the second I read her countenance.

‘Or maybe I’ve forced something that was never meant to be.’ She frowns and looks down. ‘Did you ever think of that?’

I look away, taking in the surrounding beauty, knowing words alone can never change any of them, the only action can help; and fortunate for us, I know just where to begin.

I stand, pulling her up alongside me as I say, ‘Come on. We do not need Naddalin-do not need anyone-I to know just the place!’

We head for the Countless Halls of Learning...

Stopping just shy of its steep marble steps as I peer at her, wondering (eager!) her can see what I see-the ever-changing façade that is needed for entry.

‘So, you did find it,’ she says, voice tinged with awe as we watch the revolving collection of the most sacred and beautiful places on Earth.

The Great Pyramids of Giza, the Taj Mahal morphing into the Parthenon, which turns into the Lotus temple, which becomes and so on. Our mutual acknowledgment of its beauty and wonder allowing us into the grand marble hall lined with elaborately carved columns straight out of ancient Greek times.

Things I never thought of living in a small town that was the world to me, yet more to them. Naddalin gazes around, face a mask of absolute wonder as she takes it all in. ‘I haven’t been here since-’

I peered at her, holding my breath, dying to know the details of the last time she was there.

‘Since I came to find you.’

I squint, unsure what that means.

‘Sometimes-’ She looks at me. ‘I was lucky enough to just happen upon you, ending up in the same place at just the right time. Though often I would have to wait a few years before it was proper to meet.’

‘You mean you were spying on me?’ I gape, hoping it was not as creepy as it sounds. ‘When I was a kid?’

She cringes, averting her gaze when she says, ‘No, not spying, Never- Ever. Please. What do you take me for?’ She laughs and shakes her head. ‘It was more like keeping tabs.’

Patiently waiting until the time was right. Nevertheless, the last few times when I was unable to find you, no matter how hard I tried and believe me, I tried, living like a wanderer, itinerant from place to place, sure I had lost you forever-I decided to come here. And I ran into some friends who showed me the way.’

‘Neville and Rayne.’ I nod, neither hearing nor seeing the answer in her head, but somehow sensing it is true. Overcome by an immediate rush of guilt for failing to even think of them until now. Not even wondering how they might be, where they might be, until a second ago.

‘You know them?’ She squints, surprised.

I pressed my lips together, knowing I would have to tell her the rest of the story, the parts I had hoped to abandon.

‘They led me here too-’ I pause, taking a deep breath and looking away, preferring to take in the room than meet her quizzical gaze. ‘They were at Ava’s-or at least Rayne was. Neville was out-’ I shook my head and started again. ‘She was out trying to help you when you-’

I close my eyes and sigh, deciding to just show her instead. Everything. All of it. Including the parts, I was too ashamed to put them into words. Projecting the events of that day until there are no more secrets between us. Letting her know how hard they fought to save her, while I was too stubborn, refusing to listen.

But instead of being upset as I feared, she places her hands on my shoulders, gazing at me with forgiveness as she thinks, what is done is done. We must move forward, there is no looking back.

I swallow hard and meet her gaze, knowing she is right. It is time to get started, but where to begin?

‘It’s better if we split up.’ Her nods, her words a surprise to my ears, and I am about to speak when she adds, ‘Ever, think about it. You are trying to find something to reverse the effects of the elixir I drank, while I am trying to save you from Shadowland, not the same thing.’

I sigh, disappointed but must agree. ‘I will see you back at the house then. My house if that is, okay?’ I place my hand over her and give it a squeeze, reluctant to revisit her depressingly barren room and unsure where she stands on the whole karma curse thing now that her memory is returned.

And no sooner had she nodded and closed her eyes than she vanished from sight.

So, I take a deep breath and close my eyes too, thinking I need help. I have made a huge and horrible mistake and I do not know what to do. I need to either find an antidote to the antidote-something that will reverse the effects of what Naddalin’s done- or find a way to get to her, convince her to cooperate with me-but only in a way that will not need me to- um- seriously compromise myself in a way I am not comfortable with... if you know what I mean...

Focusing on my intention, replaying the words repeatedly. Hoping it will grant access to the Akashic Records, the permanent record of everything that has is or ever will be done. Praying- I will not be shut out again like the last time- I was here.

But the time, when I hear that familiar buzz, instead of the usual long hallway leading to a mysterious room, I find myself right smack in the middle of a cineplex, its

lobby empty, snack bar abandoned, with no clue of what I should do a set of double doors opens before me.

I step into a dark theater with sticky floors, worn seats, and the scent of buttery popcorn permeating the air. Squeezing down the aisle and choosing the best seat in the house, the one halfway down and dead center, I prop my feet on the chair just before me as the lights go dim and a big tub of popcorn appears in my lap. Watching the red drapes retract as the large crystal screen begins to flicker and flare in a profusion of images that quickly race past.

But instead of the solution I had hoped for, all I got was a series of clips from movies I had already seen. Resulting in a homemade montage of my family's funniest moments, lifted straight from my old life in Oregon and unfolding to a soundtrack that only Riley could make.

Portion: 2

Watching a clip of Riley and me, both of us hamming it up on a homemade stage in our den, dancing and lip-synching for an audience consisting of our parents and dog. Soon followed by an image of Buttercup, our sweet yellow lab. Tongue straining toward her nose, licking like mad, trying to get to the chunk of peanut butter Riley had dabbed there.

And even though it is not at all what I had hoped for, I know it is important all the same. Riley promised she would find a way to communicate with me, assuring me that just because- I cannot see her anymore does not mean she is not still around.

So, I push my quest aside and sink into my seat. Knowing she is sitting beside me, silent and unseen. Wanting to share the moment, two sisters sharing the home-movie version of what used to be.

By the time I make it back to my room, Naddalin is waiting, sitting on the edge of my bed, cradling a small satin pouch in the palm of her gloved hand.

~*~

‘How long was I gone?’ I asked, plopping down beside her as I squinted at my bedside clock and figured out the math.

‘There’s no time in School,’ she reminds me. ‘But on the earth plane, I would say you were gone for a while. Did you learn anything?’

I think about the home movies I watched, Riley’s version of ‘The Bloom Family’s Funniest Videos,’ then I shake my head and shrug. ‘Nothing useful. You?’

She smiles, handing over the silk pouch as she says, ‘Open and see.’

I pull on the drawstring, slip a finger inside, and retrieve a black silk cord bearing a cluster of colorful crystals held together by thin gold bands. Watching it catch and reflect the light as I dangle it before me, thinking it is beautiful if not a bit odd.

‘It’s a charm,’ she says, watching me carefully as I take in the individual stones, each of them bearing a different shape, size, and color.

‘They have been worn through the ages and are said to hold magical properties for heralding, protection, prosperity, and balance. Though the one, being created solely for you, is heavy on the protection element since that is what you need.’

I look at her, wondering how they could harp. Then I remember the crystals I used to make the antidote that saved her, and how it really could have worked- if Naddalin had not tricked me into adding my blood to the mix.

‘It is unique, assembled, and crafted with your journey in mind. There is not another one like it, not anywhere. I know it does not solve our problem, but at least it will hurt.’

I squint at the bundle of rocks, unsure what to say. About to slip it over my head and give it a go, when she smiles and says, ‘Allow me...’ Gathering my long hair and draping it over my shoulder as she reaches behind me and secures the small golden clasp, before tucking it under my tee where no one can see.

‘Is it a secret?’ I ask, expecting the crystals to feel cold and hard against my skin and astonished to find them quite warm and comforting instead.

~*~

She brushes my hair back over my shoulder, letting it fall just shy of my waist. ‘No, it is not a secret. Though you should not flaunt it either. I have no idea just how far Naddalin’s advanced, so it is better not to draw her attention to it.’

‘She knows about the chakras,’ I say, seeing the surprise in her gaze and choosing to omit the fact that she handles that. Having unwittingly revealed all kinds of secrets while under Naddalin’s spell. She feels bad enough already, so there is no reason to make it any worse.

I tap my fingers against the amulet beneath my shirt, surprised by how solid it feels from the outside, compared to the inside, the part that rests on my skin. ‘But what about you? Don’t you need protection too?’ Watching as she unearths a similar amulet from under her long-sleeved tee, smiling as she dangles it before me. ‘How come yours looks so different?’ I ask, squinting at the cluster of sparkling stones.

‘I told you, no two are alike. Just like no two people are alike. I have my issues to overcome.’

‘You have issues?’ I laugh, though seriously wondering what they could be, she is good at everything she does. And I mean everything.

She shakes her head and laughs, a wonderful sound I do not get to hear enough anymore. ‘Believe me, I’ve got my share,’ she says, laughing again.

‘And you’re sure these will keep us safe?’ I press it against my chest, noticing how it feels like a part of me now.

‘That’s the plan.’ She shrugs, getting up from the bed and heading for the door as she adds, ‘But, Ever, please do us both a favor and try not to put it to the test, okay?’

‘What about Naddalin?’

I ask, taking in her long, lean form as she rests against the jamb. ‘Don’t you think we should produce a plan? Find a way to get her to give us what we need and be done with all the?’

Naddalin looks at me, gaze narrowed on mine. ‘There is no plan, NEVER- Ever. Engaging with Naddalin is exactly what she wants. We are better off finding a solution on our own, without relying on her.’

‘But how? Everything we have tried so far has been a total bust.’ I shake my head. ‘And why should we run ourselves ragged, searching for answers, when Naddalin’s already admitted to having the remedy? She said all I must do is pay the right price and he will hand it over- how hard can that be?’

‘And you’re willing to pay her price?’ Naddalin asks, voice steady and deep as her dark eyes sweep mine.

I avert my gaze, cheeks heating to a thousand degrees. ‘Of course not! Or at least not the price that you think!’ I bring my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them. ‘It’s just-’ I shake my head, frustrated at having to plead my case. ‘It’s just that-’

‘She wants to divide us, make us question each other, break us apart. She also wants us to go after her and start a war.’

‘NEVER- Ever, the is exactly what Naddalin wants.’ Her jaw tightens, her features harden, before meeting my gaze and softening again.

Then while I promise to do everything in my power to protect you, you must help me- and her too. You've no motive to trust her, she will lie, operate, and make no mistake, it is an extremely dangerous game that she plays.

You should promise you will stay away from her, ignore all her taunts, and will not rise to her bait. I will find a solution. Figure something out. Just please, look to me for the answers, not Naddalin, okay?'

I switched my gaze back to her, an idea beginning to form-one that might work. I press my lips together and look away, wondering why I should promise any of that when the cure is right there for the taking. Besides, I am the one who caused the situation. I am the one who got us into the mess. So, I should be the one to get us both out. 'So, we're clear about Naddalin?' She tilts her head and lifts her brow, unwilling to leave until I consent.

I nod, just barely, but still enough to convince her to head down the stairs so fast I cannot distinguish her form. The only hint of her having been here are the stones against my chest and the single red tulip she left on the bed.

Thinking in my head it has happened my prophecies- the country with the flag with the star remember that, launched rockets of war for our homeland in the USA, makes me glad to be where I am at, and remember the one that has fought and died for us, like Kristen! Now she is out there fighting with them the man and strong woman, yet once more in a new life, as one of us... the USA, it turns on the rest of the world, and they

are turning on us. I foresee a day when like all just become nothing but impressions of just that... imitations!

Part: 16

‘NEVER- Ever?’

Since as nice as it is lying beside Naddalin, the beat of our hearts connecting as one, eventually, it is just not enough. It will never- EVER- NEVER- EVER be enough. I want a normal relationship with my immortal boyfriend- NOT A GIRL! As you could think she is missing something is that I need and want- is she not? One with no walls.

Oh, yes boy- and I will stop at nothing to get it... One where I can genuinely enjoy the feel of skin as opposed to the way I remember it in my head.

(3 hours later, after sleeping in the same bed in the same room, drooling on one another as we sleep, dur-ta-dur- obviously.)

‘Did you eat yet?’

She places her hand on my shoulder as she peers at the screen- I was working on my next part of my lives to story- to add to the book- in my own words, hoping my words would stand the test of time like the girls before me, I find my story lackluster and boring at times- yet it is the story of my life- like theirs.

-And-

Since I did not prepare, did not guard myself against her touch, that is all it takes to see her version of the infamous girls stand before me, I was part of this all, which, unfortunately, is not so different from Milley's version-the two of them acting all happy and giddy, smiling at each other with an abundance of hope, yet still on the inside nothing has changed.

Then even though she seems happy, and no doubt deserves to be happy especially after all that I have put her through, I still comfort myself with the vision I had a few months back- the one where she ends up with some cute boy she used to know- from back home when she goes back in time to relive- days gone by- like me too, always looking for more in the past than in the here and now- why?

(THE QUESTION IS WHY?)

Now I am right back where I started. Sober and miserable. I guess by now I should know enough about the loss of realizing that you never really stop missing someone you just learn to live around the huge gaping hole of their absence. Just like Our past may shape us, but it does not define who we become if only that was tried for us. The only thing a person can ever really do is keep moving forward. Take that big leap forward without hesitation, without once looking back. Simply forget the past and forge toward the future.

I am egotistic, impatient, and a little unconfident. I make mistakes, I am out of control and at times hard to grip.

Nevertheless, if you cannot grip me at my nastiest, then you do not earn me at my finest- wondering if I should say or do something to temper her excitement since it is not like the little flirtation is going anywhere. Nonetheless, knowing I have already taken too big of a risk by outing myself to Milley, I do not say a word. I cannot afford to tip her off too.

I swivel around in my chair, releasing myself from her grip.

Wanting to avoid seeing anything more than I already have, waiting for her energy stream to fade.

‘Naddalin made me dinner,’ I say, voice steady and low even though it is not exactly true. Unless you count the solution, I drank.

She looks at me, gazes suddenly troubled as it narrows on mine. ‘Naddalin?’ She steps back. ‘Now there’s a name I haven’t heard in a while.’

I cringe, wishing I had not just put it out there like that. I should have broken her in slowly, gotten her used to the idea of seeing her again.

‘Does the mean you’re back together?’ ‘Yeah, um, we’re still-friendly.’ I shrug. ‘I mean we’re more than friends, we’re more like-’ I shrug, allowing my hair to fall on my face so it is partially hidden. Grasping a chunk and twisting it around, pretending to inspect for split ends even though I no longer get them.

Dating and doomed-destined to spend an eternity in the abyss-madly in love but unable to touch- ‘Well, yes, I mean, I guess you could say we’re back together again.’

Forcing a smile so wide my lips practically split down the middle, but holding it anyway, hoping it will encourage her to join in.

‘And you’re okay with that?’

She runs her hand through her long hair, a shade we used to share the same color until I started drinking the solution which turned mine even lighter- then her hers perches on the edge of my bed, crosses her legs, and drops her portfolio onto the floor- four bad signs that she is become peaceful in for one of her long, awkward talks.

Her gaze moves over me, taking in my faded jeans, my white tank top, searching for symptoms, hints, clues, telltale signs of adolescent distress.

Having only recently ruled out anorexia and or bulimia when my solution-fueled growth spurt added four inches to my height and bulked up my frame with a thin layer of muscle even though I never work out.

But the time it is not my arrival that has her unnerved, it is me- on-again-off-again-again-again- relationship with Naddalin, that is the issue. And even though that may be true, nothing about Naddalin and my relationship could ever be condensed into a chapter in a book. Having recently finished yet another parenting book claiming that a tumultuous relationship is a major cause for concern.

Like she is somehow too old for you-or-’ She shrugs, unable to place it. ‘Do not get me wrong, Never- Ever, I like Naddalin, I do.

She is nice and polite, and she is certainly very composed and yet, there is something about that cool self-assurance, something that seems odd for a young man her age.

First, it was Haven with the whole telepathy thing, and now Jaylynn's taking issue with her maturity and poise.

I push my hair off my face, so I can see her better. She is the second person today who noticed something off about her about us. And even though it is easy enough to explain, the fact that they are even noticing in the first place is what worries me.

'And while I know there are only a few months between you, she somehow comes off as more experienced. Too experienced.' She shrugs. 'And I'd hate for you to feel pressured into doing something you're not quite ready for.'

I press my lips together and try not to laugh, thinking about how she could not have gotten it more wrong. If I am the innocent maiden being chased by the big bad wolf, never imagine that I am the predator in the tale, dangerously pursuing my prey to the point of risking her life.

'Since no matter what she may say, you are in control of you, Never- Ever.

You are the one who decides who, where, and when. And no matter how you may feel about her, or any boy for that matter, they have no right to push their agenda on-' 'It is not like that,' I tell her, cutting in before she gets any more embarrassing than it already has. 'Naddalin's not like that. She is a perfect girl, an ideal girlfriend. Seriously, Jaylynn, you are way off course. Just trust me on that one, okay?'

She looks at me for a moment, brittle orange aura wavering, wanting to believe, unsure if she should.

Then she picks up her bag and heads for the door, stopping just shy of it when she says, 'I was thinking-'

I look at her, tempted to peek at her thoughts, despite my vow to never intentionally breach her privacy like that unless it has an emergency of course, which she is not.

'Since school is letting out soon even if we are back on Earth as normal-looking girls we still must go to school as if we were normal girls of our age, and since I have not heard you mention any summer plans, I thought it might be good for you to find a job, spend a few hours each day working at something.'

'What do you think?'

'What do you think of as normal?'

What do I think...?

I gape, with bugging eyes, mouth dry, at a complete loss for words... I was, well, I think I should have peered into your head think over your thoughts more than my own, because she does succeed as a major agony call!

'Nothing full time or anything like that. There will be plenty of time for the beach and your friends. I just thought it would be good for you too-'

‘Is the about money?’

My mind reeling, frantic to find a way out...

If it is a simple matter of pitching in for the mortgage and groceries, then I will gladly produce whatever she needs.

Not even for a day. Un-huh. No way, hell, she can even take whatever is left of my parent’s life insurance policy for all I care it did set me for life, after the fact... but what she cannot have been my summer.

‘Ever, of course, it is not about money- is it not yet that’s also life, no?’ She averts her gaze as her cheeks flush soft pink.

Mysteriously averse to discussing all things economically for someone who makes a living as a nurse, on and off with the Earthing she chooses to be in within her life spans or within her old body too.

‘I just thought it might be good for you to, you know, meet some new people, learn something new.

Get out of your usual environment for a few hours each day, and-’ And get away from Naddalin.

Not needing to read her thoughts to know what the is about, now that she knows we are back together she is more strong-minded than ever to break us apart.

Besides, while I get how troubled she was by all the moodiness and despair, I lay open to her when we were apart, the time she had it all wrong.

It is not like she thinks. Though I've no idea how to explain that to her and keep my secrets intact. '-and as it so happens, a summer internship just opened for me, working with her as an LPN, and I'm sure, it's just a matter of speaking with the senior partners, and the job will be mine.' Then she grins, face radiant, eyes bright, expecting me to join the fête as well- when I do it at last.

'But aren't those positions usually reserved for law students?' I ask, sure I am pathetically underqualified to fill those shoes.

But she just shakes her head. 'It is not that type of internship. This is more of a filing and phone answering assignment. And there is no money in it either, though you will get school credit and a small end of the season bonus. I just thought it might do you some good. Not to mention how it will beef up those college applications of yours.' College- yet another thing I used to obsess about but not anymore.

I mean, what use could I have for all those classes and professors when all I must do is place my hand on a book or peek inside my teacher is hard to know all the answers? Cheating is too easy, yet miss honesty wants me to do it the hard way, I question why?

This is something that I have questioned her with for years if you have the power to take then do so-o, you are not hurting anyone but yourself.

‘I’d hate for anyone else to get in there when I know you’re simply perfect for the job.’

I stared at her, unsure of what to say.

‘It’s a pleasant experience for a person your age,’ she adds, her indignant tone a result of my silence.

‘It is suggested in all the books. They say it builds charisma, promise, and the chastisement to show up on time and get the job done.’

Great, So, I have Dr. Phil to thank for ruining my summer- I thought.

It is my fault she changed, I am annoyed with Jaylynn until I remember how she was when I first got her-calm, tranquil, and completely laid back, allowing me all the space and freedom I needed.

My postponement, my rejection to ingest anything other than the pink solution, and all the drama with Naddalin are what sent her over the edge.

Besides the is where it led to the dreaded summer internship, she is bent on securing for me.

But no way can I spend the summer juggling a mountain of files and incessantly ringing phones when I am going to need all my free time, I can get to find an antidote for Naddalin.

And working in Jaylynn's office- within the nursing department within the Rosman building, with her and her colleagues prying over my shoulder, just will not do, sometimes I was just a little schoolchild still- I miss that day, and I think about and say within my mind not really- am meant to be genuinely happy?

Though it is not like I can say that outright. It will set off her alarms. I need to play it cool, let her know that while I've nothing against discipline and character building, I prefer to tackle those things on my own.

'I'm cool with working,' I say, trying not to press my lips together, fidget, or break eye contact, three definite giveaways that I am not being entirely honest. 'But since you do so much for me already, I would feel a lot better if I could find my job. I mean, I am just not sure I am cut out for office work, so maybe I could look around a little. See what my options are. I will even pitch in on the mortgage and food. It is the least I can do.'

'What food?' She laughs, shaking her head at me.

'You barely eat! Besides, I do not want your money, ever... though, I will help you establish a line of credit if you would like.'

'Sure,' I shrug, forcing an enthusiasm I do not feel since I do not need such conventional things. 'That would be great!' I add, knowing that the longer I can keep her mind off the internship, the better for me.

'Okay then,' she drums her fingers against the doorjamb as she completes her plan. 'You've got one week to find something on your own.'

I gulp, trying to keep the eye- bugging to a minimum. One week? What kind of a head start is that when I do not even know where to begin? I have never had a job before. Is it possible to just manifest one?

‘I know it’s not much time,’ she says, reading my face. ‘But I’d hate for them to fill the position when I know you’d be perfect.’

She heads into the hall and closes the door between us, leaving me sideswiped, dumbstruck, staring at the flickering remnants of her orangey aura, her magnetic energy field, hovering insistently in the space where she stood. Thinking how ironic it is that I was just making fun of Naddalin for assuming she could land a job without any experience only to find myself facing the same fate.

I toss and turn all night. Bed a tangled mess of sweat-dampened pillows and blankets, body, and mind exhausted by dreams. Waking briefly, gasping for air, only to be pulled under again, returning to the very same place I fought to escape.

And the only reason- I want it to stop is that Riley is there. Laughing happily as she grabs hold of my hand, taking me on a tour of a very strange land. But even though I skip right alongside her, pretending to enjoy the trip too, the moment she turns her back, I scramble for the surface, eager to remove myself from the scene.

Because, the truth is, it is not Riley. Riley is gone. Having crossed the bridge at my urging, moving on to some unknown place. And even though she keeps yanking me back, yelling at me to pay attention, to just trust her and stop running- I refuse to obey. Sure, that it is punishment for harming Naddalin, sending Haven to Shadowland, and

putting everything I care about at risk-allowing my subconscious to produce these guilt-induced images, so sugar-coated with happiness, there is no way they are real.

But the last time, just as I am about to run, Riley appears right before me, blocking my exit, and yelling at me to stay put. Standing before a large stage and slowly drawing the drapes, revealing a tall, narrow, rectangular cube-like a prison of glass-containing a desperate and struggling Naddalin inside.

I rush to her aid as Riley looks on, pleading with her to hang in there while I help her break free. But she cannot even hear me. I cannot even see me. Just continues to fight until so overcome with exhaustion, with absolute futility, she closes her eyes and fades straight into the abyss.

The home for lost souls.

I bolted from my bed, body shaking, chilled, drenched with sweat, standing in the center of my room with a pillow clutched to my chest. Overcome not only by the feeling of utter defeat but by the horrible message my imagined sister has sent-telling me that no matter how hard I try, I cannot save my soul mate from me.

I ran for my closet, changing into some clothes before grabbing some sneakers and heading for the garage. Knowing it is too early to go to school, too early to go anywhere. But I refuse to give up. Refuse to believe in nightmares. I must start somewhere. I must use what I got.

But just as I am about to climb into my car, I think better. Realizing the entire process of opening the garage door and starting the engine will risk waking Jaylynn. And

even though I can easily step outside and manifest another car, bike, Vespa, or whatever else I might want, I decided to try running instead.

I have never been much of a runner. Far more used to dragging my feet through every forced lap in P.E. than striving for any personal best. But that was before I became immortal. Before I was bestowed with incredible speed. A speed I have not even begun to test the limits of since the last time I ran was the first time I realized I even had the potential. But now that I am faced with the perfect opportunity to see just how far and fast, I can go before stopping, dropping, or crumbling to the ground with a debilitating case of side cramps, I cannot wait to try it out.

I slipped out the side door and headed for the street. At first thinking, I should warm-up, start a nice slow jog before hitting the asphalt at full throttle. But no sooner have I started than a major surge of adrenaline kicks in, coursing through my body like the highest-grade rocket fuel. And the next thing I know, it is full speed ahead. Running so fast my neighbor's houses are reduced to a visual blur of stucco and stone. Jumping into fallen trash cans and dodging poorly parked cars, as I race from street to street with the grace and agility of a jungle cat. Having no awareness of my legs or my feet, just trusting they will not fail me. That they will get me to my destination in a miraculous time.

And no more than a few seconds have passed when I am standing before it, the one place I swore I would never return to, prepared to do the one thing I promised Naddalin I am would not- approaching Naddalin's door, hoping to broker a deal.

But before I can even raise my hand to knock, Naddalin is there. Clad in a deep purple robe over blue silk pajamas, her matching velvet slippers with embroidered golden foxes peeking out from the hem. Her gaze sleek, narrowed, looking over me without a trace of surprise.

‘Ever.’ She cocks her head to the side, allowing for an unobstructed view of her flashing Ouroboros tattoo. ‘What brings you to the neighborhood?’

My fingers play with the amulet just under my shirt, heart racing beneath it, hoping Naddalin’s right, that it will give the necessary protection-should it come to that.

‘We need to talk,’ I say, trying not to cringe as her eyes sail over me, enjoying a nice, long, leisurely cruise.

She squints into the night, then goes back at me. ‘Do we?’ She lifts her brow. ‘And here I had no idea.’

I start to roll my eyes, but remembering my purpose for coming here, I settle for pressing my lips together instead.

‘Recognize the door?’ She wraps her knuckles hard against the wood, eliciting a nice solid thump, as I wonder what she could be up to. ‘Of course, you do not,’ she says, lips quirking at the sides. ‘That is because it is new. I was forced to replace the old one after your last visit. Do you remember? When you busted your way in so you could toss my supply of elixir down the drain?’ She laughs and shakes her head. ‘Very naughty of you, ever. And quite a mess I must say. I hope you will manage to behave better

today.’ She leans against the door frame and waves me in, gazing at me in a way so deep, so intimate, it is all I can do not to squirm.

I heard down the hall and into the den, noticing how the door is not the only thing that has changed since I was last here. Gone are the framed Botticelli prints and abundance of chintz, all of it replaced by marble and stone, dark heavy fabrics, rough plastered walls, and black iron things shaped into scrolls.

‘Tuscan?’ I turned, startled to find her standing so near I could see the individual dark purple flecks in her eyes.

She shrugs, refusing to back up and give me some space. ‘Sometimes I get a little hankering for the old country.’ Her smiles, a slow widening of her cheeks, displaying shiny white teeth. ‘As you well know, Ever, there’s no place like home.’

I swallow hard and turn away, trying to decide my quickest escape since I cannot afford to make even the slightest mistake.

‘So, tell me, so what do I owe the magnificent Jewell?’ She glances over her shoulder as she heads for the bar. Removing a bottle of elixir from the wine refrigerator and pouring it into a cut crystal glass, before offering it to me. But I just shake my head and wave it away, watching as she carries it over to the couch where she plops herself down, spreads her legs wide, and rests the glass on her knee. ‘I am assuming you did not quickly visit in the dead of night to admire my latest decorating scheme. So, tell me, what is the purpose of them?’

I clear my throat, forcing myself to look her square in the eye without flinching, wavering, fidgeting, or showing any other sign of weakness. Aware of how the whole situation can change in an instant- how easily I can turn from mild curiosity to irresistible prey.

‘I’m here to call a truce,’ I say, alert for a reaction but getting only her penetrating gaze. ‘You know, a cease-fire, a proclamation of peace, a-’

‘Please.’ She waves her hand. ‘Spare me the definition, Liv- I can say it in twenty languages and forty dialects, you?’

I shrug, knowing I am lucky to have said it is the one. Watching as she swirls her drink, the iridescent red liquid flashing and sparking as it runs up the sides and splashes back down.

‘And just what sort of truce are you after? You of all people should know how it works. I’ve no intention of giving you anything unless you are willing to give up something of your own.’ She passes the narrow space just beside her, smiling as though I would consider joining her there.

‘Why do you do them?’ I ask, unable to hold my frustration. ‘I mean, you’re decent looking, you’re immortal, you’ve got all the gifts that go with it you can have anyone you want, so why do you insist on bothering me?’

She throws her head back and laughs, a giant roar that fills up the room. Finally calming down enough to level her gaze, looking at me as she says, ‘Decent

looking?’ She shakes her head and laughs again, placing her glass on the table and retrieving a pair of golden nail clippers from a jewel-encrusted case.

‘Decent looking,’ she mutters, shaking her head, taking a moment to check out her nails, before returning her focus to me. ‘But you see, liv, that is just it. I can have anything I want. Anything or anyone.’

It all comes so easily. Too easy.’ Her sighs, getting to work on her nails, so absorbed by the task, I am wondering if she will continue when she says, ‘It all gets a little tedious after the first-oh-hundred or so years. And while you are far too new to understand any of them, someday you will realize just how big of a favor I have done you.’

I squinted, having no idea what she could mean. A favor? Is she serious?

‘You sure you won’t have a seat?’ She wags her nail clipper toward the overstuffed chair just to my right, urging me to take it. ‘You are making me out to be a bad host, insisting on standing there like that. Besides, do you have any idea how fetching you look? A little-bedridden-sure, but in the sexiest way.’

She narrows her eyes until they are sleek as a cat’s, lips parting just enough for her tongue to escape. But I just stay put and pretend not to notice. Everything with Naddalin is a game and taking a seat would be a conceded defeat. Though staying like them, being careful wet her lips as her gaze lingers in all the wrong places, does not feel like much of a win.

‘You’re even more delusional than I thought if you think you’ve done me a favor,’ I say, voice hoarse, scratchy, a long way from strong. ‘You’re crazy!’ I add, regretting it the instant it is out.

But Naddalin just shrugs, unfazed by my outburst as she returns to her nails. ‘Trust me, it is more than just a favor, liv. I have given you a purpose. A- reason d’être as they say.’ She glances at me, brow raised. ‘Tell me, Ever, are you not completely fixated on finding a way to-consummate-with Naddalin? Are you not so desperate for a solution as you convinced yourself it was a clever idea to come here?’

I swallow hard and stare at her. I should have known better, should have heeded Naddalin’s advice.

‘You’re too impatient.’ She nods, smoothing the edges of her freshly clipped nails. ‘What is the rush when you have all the infinity laid out before you? Think about it, Ever, how exactly would you spend your eternity if it were not for me? Showering each other with huge bouquets of bloody red tulips? Having looked at each other so often it could not help but grow bored?’

‘The is ridiculous.’ I glare. ‘And the fact that you see it like the-like it is some chivalrous deed that you’ve done-’ I shake my head, knowing there is no need to continue. She is delusional, insane, figured out to see things in her selfish way.

‘Hundred years within my body and others- it all the same, I yearned for her,’ she says, tossing her nail clippers aside, gaze never once leaving mine.

‘And why, you ask? Why would I bother with the same woman for so long when I can have anyone?’ She looks at me as though waiting for the answer, but we both know I’ve no intention of going there.

‘It wasn’t just her beauty like you think-though I will admit, it did spur things at the start.’ Her smiles and eyes are reminiscent. ‘No, it was a simple fact that I could not have her. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how long I pined, I was never allowed’-she looks at me, gazes heavy, intense-admittance-if you will.’

I roll my eyes. I cannot help it. The fact that she wasted centuries pining for that monster is of no interest to me.

But she just continues, ignoring my pained expression when she says, ‘Make no mistake, Ever, I am about to share something especially important, something you really should keep in mind.’ She leans forward, arms on knees, voice steady and low, filled with new urgency. ‘We always want what we can’t have.’ She leans back, nodding as though she just shared the key to enlightenment. ‘It is human nature. We are hardwired that way. And as much as you would prefer not to believe it, it is the only reason Naddalin’s spent the last four hundred years longing for you.’

I look at her, face placid, body still, aware that she is trying to hurt me, prodding the usual spots, knowing she has been one of my fears from the moment I first learned of our history.

‘Face, it, Ever, even Haven’s incredible beauty was not enough to keep her interest. I am sure you are aware of just how quickly she got tired of her?’

I swallow hard, stomach like a hard-bitten marble. Since when are two hundred years considered quickly? But I guess when you are dealing with eternity everything is relative.

‘It’s not a beauty contest,’ I say, cringing when I hear the words spoken aloud. I mean, seriously, is that the best I could do?

‘Of course, it is not, Luv.’ Naddalin shakes her head, pity in her gaze. ‘If it were, Haven would win.’ She settles back, arms spread across the cushions, glass resting on top, daring me to respond. ‘Let me guess, you’ve convinced yourself it’s about two souls meeting as one, destined for each other, and all of that-puppy love?’ She laughs, nodding when she adds, ‘That is what you’re thinking, right?’

‘You don’t want to know what I’m thinking.’ I narrowed my gaze, decided to get to the point now that my patience’s dissolved. ‘I didn’t come here to be bored by your philosophical litanies; I came here because-’

‘Because you want something from me.’ She nods, setting down her drink, glass meeting wood with a solid, wet thwomp. ‘In which case, I am in the driver’s seat, which means you’re in no position to set the pace.’

‘Why do you do them?’ I shake my head, having grown bored with the game. ‘Why do you bother where you know I am not interested? Surely you realize that no matter what you do to Naddalin and me, it will never bring Haven back. What is done is done. It can never be changed. And, in the end, all the game playing, all the nonsense you engage in, all it does is prevent you from living your life-from moving on.’ I continue to

stare, gaze unwavering, convincing. Projecting an image of her handing over the antidote and cooperating with me. 'So, I am asking you, in as reasonable a way as I can please help me undo what you have done to Naddalin, so we can all coexist.'

She shakes her head; lids squinted tight. 'Sorry, darlin,' the price is set. Now it is just a matter of whether you are willing to pay.'

I lean against the wall, tired, defeated, but not letting on. Knowing the one thing she wants is the one thing I will never give. The same old game Naddalin warned me about. 'You will never have me, Naddalin. Never, ever, for as long as I-'

Not even getting to the more degrading, insulting part that comes next when she rises from the couch, moving so quickly her breath hits my cheek long before I can blink.

'Relax,' she whispers, face looming so close I can make out each flawless pore on her skin. 'As much fun as that might be, giving an amusing diversion at least, I am afraid that is not it. I am after something far more esoteric than a virginal shag. Though, if you would like to make a go of it, no strings attached, then I assure you, darlin,' I'm certainly up for the task.' Her smiles, deep blue eyes boring into mine, projecting the movie she plays in her head, the one starring her, and me, and a king-sized bed.

I look away, breath coming ragged, too fast, summoning every ounce of my will not to slam my knee in her groin when her nose glances at my ear, my cheek, my neck, inhaling my scent.

‘I know what you’re going through, Ever,’ she murmurs, lips brushing the tip of my ear. ‘Longing for something so close and yet you can never quite taste it. It is the kind of pain most people will never experience. But we know, don’t we? You and I are joined in that way.’

I relax my fists and fight to steady myself. Knowing I cannot risk doing anything rash, I cannot afford to overreact.

‘Not to worry she said.’

She smiles at me, slipping just out of my reach.

‘You are a nifty girl.

I am sure you will figure it out.

And if not-’ Her shrugs. ‘Well, nothing changes, right? Everything stays the same. You and I with our fates intertwined-for all of infinity.’

She slips down the hall, moving so fast it is a moment before I can make out her form. Tilting her head and urging me toward the door, practically pushing me onto her stoop when she says, ‘Sorry to cut them so short. Though I do so with your reputation in mind. If Naddalin ever found out you were here-well, that could be tragic for you, couldn’t it?’

Her smiles, all shiny white teeth, golden hair, tanned skin, and blue eyes-the ultimate California poster boy beckoning-Come live the good life in Laguna Beach! And

I am furious with myself-furious for being so stupid for not listening to Naddalin-for putting us further at risk. Handing Naddalin yet one more thing to lord over my head.

‘Sorry you didn’t get what you came for, Liv,’ she purrs, her attention pulled by a vintage black Jaguar that pulls into the drive, having a gorgeous dark-haired couple who head right inside. Closing the door behind them as she adds, ‘Whatever you do, avoid Marco’s car on your way out, she’ll flip if you so much as smudge it.’

I walk home... Or at least, that is the direction I originally heard it. But somewhere along the way, I take a turn. And then another. And another. My feet moving so slowly they practically drag, knowing there is no need to run, nothing to prove. Despite my strength and speed, I am no match for Naddalin. here is the expert of the game and I am merely her pawn.

I continue, deep into the heart of Laguna, or the Village, as it is called. Too awake to go home, too ashamed to see Naddalin, making my way through the dark, empty streets until stopping before a small, well-tended cottage, with flowering plants flanking either side of the door and a woven welcome mat placed just so, making it appear warm, friendly, completely benign.

Only it is not... Not even close. Now it is more like a crime scene. And unlike the last time I was here, the time I do not bother knocking. There is no point. Ava’s long gone. After stealing the elixir and leaving Naddalin to fend for herself, she has no intention of returning.

I unlock the door with my mind and step in, taking a quick look around before I move past the den and into the kitchen. Surprised to find the usually well-ordered room reduced to an absolute mess-the sink piled high with dirty glasses and dishes as the trash overflows to the floor. And even though I am sure it is not Ava who has done the, clearly someone is here.

I creep down the hall, peering into a series of empty rooms until I get to the indigo door at the end, the one that leads to Ava's so-called sacred space where she used to meditate and try to reach dimensions beyond. Opening the door just a crack and squinting into the dark, making out two sleeping figures sprawled on the floor. Skimming my hand along the wall and fruitlessly searching for a light, before remembering my ability to illuminate the room on my own only to find the last two people I ever expected to see.

'Rayne?' I kneel beside her, holding my breath as she rolls over and opens one eye.

'Oh Henry, ever.' She rubs her eyes and struggles to sit. 'Only I am not Rayne, I am Neville. Rayne's over there.'

I glance at her twin on the far side of the room, noting the scowl that crosses her face the second she realizes it is me.

'What're you doing here?' I ask, focusing on Neville again since she has always been the nicer of the two.

‘We live here.’ She shrugs, tucking her wrinkled white shirt into her blue plaid skirt as she gets off the floor.

I glance between them, taking in their pale skin, large dark eyes, and straight, black, shoulder-length hair with the razor-slashed bangs, noticing how they are both still dressed in the same private school uniforms as the first day we met. But unlike in School where they always appear so clean and pristine, now they are the opposite-sadly disheveled and completely uncared for.

‘But you cannot live here. This is Ava’s house.’ I shake my head. The idea of them squatting here leaves me extremely unnerved. ‘You should think about going home. You know, back to school with the other girls?’

Interval: 2

The Pretender of Secrets

Partition: 1

(Back at Skaufyceol castle- and at the school)

‘We can’t...’

Rayne pulls on her knee socks, making sure they are of an exact equal height, accidentally giving the only real clue that helps me tell them apart.

‘Thanks to you, we’re stuck here forever,’ she mumbles, taking a moment to glare at me.

I glance at Neville- and Killie too, hoping she will, and she would explain.

But she just shakes her head at her sister, before looking at me. ‘Ava’s gone.’ She shrugs. ‘But do not let Rayne give you the wrong impression. We are quite happy to see you. We had a running bet on how soon you would show.’

My gaze darts between them, laughing nervously as I say, ‘Oh really? Who won?’

Rayne rolls her eyes and points at her sister. ‘She did. I was sure you had abandoned us for good.’

I pause, something about the way she just said that- ‘Wait, you mean you guys have been here the whole time?’

‘We can’t get back.’ Neville shrugs. ‘We’ve lost our magic.’

‘Well, I am sure I can help you return. I mean, you do want to return- right?’ I look at them, seeing Rayne smirk as Neville just nods.

Knowing them will be a lot easier than they think since all I must do is make the portal, get them settled, then say my goodbyes and make the return trip back to Laguna alone.

‘We’d like that very much,’ Neville says.

‘And we would like to leave now,’ Rayne adds, eyes narrowed. ‘After all, it’s the very least you can do.’

I swallow hard.

I deserve that, but I still wonder who is more desperate for them to leave, them or me?

I motioned toward Rayne as I heard for the futon, wondering why neither of them thought to sleep on it instead of the floor.

‘Come,’ I say...

I was glancing over my shoulder.

‘You sit here on my right, and Neville, you sit here.’

I pat the lumpy cushion of the sofa.

‘Now grab my hands and close your eyes, then focus on seeing the portal with all of you might.’

How did you weigh the numerous factors?

Besides as soon as the image is clear, I want you to see yourself stepping right through, knowing I am right there beside you, keeping you safe. Okay...?’

I peek at them, seeing them nod before we go through the motions, recreating all the right steps.

But just as I step through the light and into that vast fragrant field, I open my eyes and find I am alone.

‘Told you,’ Rayne says, the second I return. Standing before me, eyes angry, small, accusing, pale hands clutching her plaid skirted hips. And it is all because we tried to help you!’

‘Told you our magic is gone. We are stuck here now with no way to get back.’

‘Rayne!’ Neville shakes her head at her sister, then glances at me with an apologetic look on her face.

‘Well, it’s true!’ Rayne glares. ‘I told you we should not risk it. I told you she would not listen.’

Partition: 2

I saw it clear as day. The overwhelming possibility she would make the wrong choice- which, I might add, she did!’ She shakes her head and frowns. ‘It went exactly as predicted. And now we are the ones paying the price.’

Oh, you are not the only ones, I think. Hoping they have lost their ability to read minds as well since I am immediately shamed by the thought. No matter how much she is annoying me, I know she is right.

‘Listen,’ I say, swallowing hard as I glance at them, needing to defuse them. ‘I know how bad you want to get back. Trust me, I do. And I am going to do everything I can to help you.’ I nod, seeing them glance at each other, two identical faces marred by complete disbelief. ‘I mean, I am not exactly sure how I am going to do it, but just trust

that I will. I will do everything I can to help you get back. And in the meantime, I will do everything I can to keep you both comfortable and safe. Scout's Jewell. Okay?'

Rayne looks at me, rolling her eyes and having a sigh. 'Just get us back to school,' she says, arms crossing her chest. 'That is all we want. Nothing short of that will do.'

I nod, refusing to let her get to me when I say, 'Understood. But if I am going to help you, I will need you to answer some questions.'

They look at each other, Rayne's gaze signaling a silence: No way, as Neville turns, nodding at me as she says, 'Okay.'

And even though I am not sure how to phrase it, it is something I have been wondering for a while now, so I just dive in. 'I'm sorry if the offends you, but I need to know are you guys dead?' I hold my breath, fully expecting them to be mad, or at the very least insulted- any reaction but the laughter I get. Watching as they fall all over themselves, Rayne doubled over, slapping her knee, as Neville rolls off the futon, practically convulsing. 'Well, you can't blame me for asking.' I frown, the one who is insulted. 'I mean, we did meet in School where plenty of dead people spend time together. Not to mention how you are both unnaturally pale.'

Rayne leaned against the wall, fully recovered from her laughing fit, and smirked at me. 'So, we are pale. Big deal.' She glances at her sister, then back at me. 'It's not like you're exactly rocking' a tan. And yet, you do not see us assuming you are a member of the dearly departed.'

I wince, knowing it is true, but still. ‘Yeah, well, you had an unfair advantage. Thanks to Riley you knew all about me long before we met. You know exactly who I am and what I am, and if I have any hope of helping you, then I am going to have to know a few things too. So as much as you may resent it, as much as you may want to resist, the only way we are going to get anywhere is if you tell me your story.’

‘Never,’ Rayne says, staring at her sister, warning her not to rebel.

But Neville ignores her and turns right to me. ‘We are not dead. Not even close. We are more like- refugees. Refugees from the past if you will.’

I glance between them, thinking all I must do is lower my guard, focus my quantum remote, and touch them for their entire life story to be revealed, but figuring I should at least try to get their version first.

‘A long time ago,’ she starts, peering at her disapproving sister before taking a deep breath and forging ahead. ‘An exceptionally long time ago we were facing a-’ She squinches her brow, searching for just the right word, nodding at me when she says, ‘Well, let us just say we were about to become victims of a dark event, one of the most shameful times in our history, but we escaped by fleeing to School. And then, well, we lost track of time and we have been there ever since. Or at least until last week when we came to help you.’

Rayne groans, dropping to the floor and burying her face in her hands, but Neville just ignores her, still looking at me when she says, ‘But now our worst fear has

come true. Our magic is gone, we've nowhere to go, and no idea how to survive in the place.'

'What sort of persecution did you flee?' I ask, watching her closely, searching for clues. 'And how long ago is exceptionally long ago? Just what are we dealing with here?' Wondering if their history stretches as far back as Naddalin's, or if they belong to a more recent past.

They gaze at each other, communicating a wordless agreement that shuts me right out. So, I move toward Neville, grasping her hand so quickly she has no time to react. Immediately pulled into her mind- her world- seeing the story unfold as though I was right there. Standing on the sidelines, an unnoticed observer, fully immersed in the chaos and fear of that day, witness to images so horrible I am tempted to turn away.

Watching as an angry mob swarm their home, voices raised- torchers high- their aunt barring the door as best she can, making the portal and urging the twins toward the safety of School.

About to step through the portal and join them when the door gives way, and the twins disappear. Separated from everything they once knew, having no idea what became of their aunt, a visit to the Great Halls of Learning showed them the torturous trial of false accusations she was forced to endure. Refusing to confess to any kind of sorcery, having taken the Wiccan Rede of 'An it harms none, does what ye will,' and knowing she had done nothing wrong; she rebuffed her oppressor and held her head high to the gallows where she was brutally hung.

I stagger back, fingers seeking the amulet just under my tee, something about their aunt's gaze so eerily familiar, leaving me shaky, unsettled, reminding myself that I am safe, they are safe- that things like that do not happen these days.

‘So now you know.’ Neville shrugs as Rayne shakes her head. ‘Our whole story. Everything about us. Do you blame us for choosing to hide?’

I glance at them, unsure of what to say. ‘I-’ I clear my throat and start over. ‘I am so sorry. I had no idea.’ I glance at Rayne, seeing how she refuses to look at me, then over at Neville who solemnly bows her head. ‘I had no idea you guys escaped the Salem Witch Trials.’

‘Not exactly,’ Rayne says, before Neville cheers in.

‘What she means is we were never tried. Our aunt stood accused. One day she was revered as the most sought-after midwife, and the next, she was rounded up and taken away.’ She sucks in her breath, eyes welling up as though it were yesterday.

‘We would’ve gone with her, we had nothing to hide,’ Rayne says, lifting her chin and narrowing her gaze. ‘And it certainly was not Clara’s fault that poor baby died. It is the father who did it. She did not want the baby or its mother. So, she did away with them both and blamed Clara. Crying which so loud the entire town heard- but then Clara made the portal and forced us to hide, and she was about to join us when- well, you know the rest.’

‘But that was over three hundred years ago!’ I cry, still unused to the idea of existence that long despite my immortality.

The twins shrug.

‘So, if you haven’t been back since-’ I shake my head, the monumental size of the problem just beginning to unfold. ‘I mean, do you have any idea how much things have changed since you were last here? Seriously. It is like a whole different world from the one that you left.’

‘It’s not like we’re idiots.’ Rayne shakes her head. ‘Things progress in School too, you know. New people arrive all the time, manifesting the things they are attached to, all the stuff they cannot bear to let go.’

But that is not what I meant, in fact, not even close. I was not just referring to cars versus horse-drawn carriages, and trendy boutiques versus hand-sewn- but more their ability to get along in the world- blending in, adapting, not standing out in the glaring way that they do! Taking in their razor- slashed bangs, their large dark eyes, and extremely pale skin, knowing their twenty-first-century makeover is far less about a uniform change than a complete and total overhaul.

‘Besides, Riley prepared us,’ Neville says, eliciting a loud groan from Rayne, and my full attention from me. ‘She manifested a private school and convinced us to enroll. That is where these uniforms came from. She was our teacher, coaching us in all modern ways, including our speech. She wanted us to return and was determined to prepare us for the trip. Partly because she wanted us to look after you, and partly because she thought we were crazy for missing our teens.’

I freeze, suddenly grasping a new understanding of Riley's interest in the- one that has far less to do with me, and everything to do with her. 'How old are you guys?' I whimpered, looking to Neville for the answer. 'Or should I say, how old were you when you first arrived in School?' Knowing they have not aged a day since.

'Thirteen,' Neville says, knitting her brow. 'Why?'

I close my eyes and shake my head, stifling a laugh as I think: I knew it!

Riley always dreamed of the day she would be thirteen, a bona fide teenager having finally made it to the important double digits. But after dying at twelve, she chose to hang around the earth plane, living her adolescence vicariously through me. So, it only makes sense she would try to convince Neville and Rayne to return, not wanting anyone else to miss out like her.

And if Clara can find the strength, and Riley the hope, in situations so incredibly dire and bleak, surely, I can overcome Naddalin.

I glance between the twins, knowing they cannot stay here on their own or come home to live with Jaylynn and me, though they are quite able and ready, if not entirely willing to lend us a hand.

'Grab your stuff,' I say, heading for the door. 'I'm taking you to your new home.'

The second we step outside I realize we will need a car. And since I am more interested in speed than comfort, especially after seeing the way the twins cling to each

other as they gaze around warily, I manifest something that will get us there fast and quickly herd them in. Ordering Neville to sit on Rayne's lap as I get myself settled and step on the gas, navigating the streets with surprising skill, while the twins practically spend time together the window, gaping at all that we pass.

‘Have you guys been inside the whole time?’ I glance at them, never having seen anyone react to the beauty of Laguna Beach in quite the same way.

They nod, never once averting their gaze. Squirming in their seat as I pull up to the gate. Allowing the uniformed guard to peer through the window and scrutinize them, before letting us in.

‘Where are you taking us?’ Rayne eyes me suspiciously. ‘What is with the guards and big gates? Is prison?’

I head up the hill, glancing at her when I say, ‘Don't you have gated communities in School?’ Never actually having seen one myself, but then again, I have not lived there for the last three centuries as they have.

They shake their heads, eyes wide, clearly on edge.

‘Not to worry.’ I turn onto Naddalin's street and into her drive. ‘It is not a prison, that is not what the gates are for. They are more to keep people out rather than in.’

‘But why would you want to keep people out?’ they ask, two childlike voices blending into one.

I squinted, having no idea how to answer since it is not like I was raised like the either, all the communities in my old hood were direct access. 'It's meant to keep people-' I start to say safe, but that is not it either. 'Anyway.' I shake my head. 'If you are going to live here, then you better get used to it. That is all there is.'

'But we're not going to live here,' Rayne says. 'You said it was just a temporary fix until you find a way to get us back, remember?'

I take a deep breath and grip the wheel harder, reminding myself how scared she must feel, no matter how bratty she gets.

'Of course, it's temporary.' I nod, forcing a smile. Or at least it better be, because if not, someone is going to be extremely displeased. I climb out of the car and motion for them to follow, saying, 'Ready to see your new temporary home?'

I head for the door, the two of them close at my heels as I stand right before it, debating whether I should knock and wait for Naddalin to open it or just stride right in since she is asleep. And I am about to do the latter when Naddalin swings the door open, takes one look at me, and says, 'Are you okay?'

I smile, tacking on a telepathic message of Before you say anything- anything at all just tries to stay calm and give me a chance to explain her eyes curious, questioning as I say, 'Can we come in?'

She moves aside, eyes wide with shock when Neville and Rayne step out from behind me and barrel right into her. Skinny arms wrapped around her waist, gazing up at her adoringly as they squeal, 'Naddalin! It is you! It is you!' And as nice as the little

reunion is, I cannot help but notice how their reaction to her, with all the love and excitement, is the opposite of their reaction to me.

She smiles, ruffling their hair and bending down to plant a kiss on the top of their heads. 'How long has it been?' She pulls away and squints.

'Last week,' Rayne says, complete adoration displayed on her face. 'Seconds before Ever added her blood to the antidote and wrecked everything.'

'Rayne!' Neville glances at her sister and me, shaking her head. But I just let it go. The is one battle I will never win.

'I meant before that.' Naddalin squints into the distance, trying to remember the date.

They look at her, a mischievous gleam in their eyes when they say, 'It was just over six years ago when Ever was ten!'

I gape, eyes practically popping out of my head as Naddalin laughs. 'Ah, yes. And I have you two to thank for helping me find her. And since you know how much she means to me, I would appreciate your kindness toward her. That is not too much to ask, is it?' She chucks Rayne under the chin, causing her to smile as her cheeks flush bright pink.

'So, to what do I owe the incredible Jewell?' She leads us into the still empty living room. 'Of being reunited with my long-lost friends, who, I might add, haven't aged a day since we met.'

They look at each other and giggle, clearly prepared to be charmed by anything she says. And before I can even think of a reply, find the right words to slowly break her in and get her used to the idea of their living with her, they look at each other and shout, ‘Ever said we could live with you!’

Naddalin glances at me, smile still planted on her face, as a look of pure horror creeps into her eyes.

‘Temporarily,’ I add, gaze meeting her, sending a barrage of telepathic red tulips her way. ‘Just until I find a way to get them back to school, or their magic returns, whichever comes first.’ Tacking on a mental note of Remember when you said you wanted to improve your karma, to make up for your past? Well, what better way than to help someone in need? And the way you can keep the house since you will need extra space. It is the perfect solution. Everyone wins! Nodding and smiling so eagerly I am like a bobblehead doll.

Naddalin glances first at me, then the twins, laughing and shaking her head when she says, ‘Of course you can stay. For as long as you need. So, what do you say we all head upstairs, so you can pick out your rooms?’

I sigh, my perfect boyfriend is proving herself even more perfect. Following behind as the twins race up the stairs- happy, giggling, completely transformed now that they are in Naddalin’s care.

‘Can we have the room?’ They ask, eyes lighting up as they stand in the doorway of Naddalin’s special room that is still devoid of her things.

‘No!’ I answer too quickly, wincing when they turn, eyes narrowed and glaring at me. But even though I feel bad about the negative start, I have decided to return the room to its normal state, and there is no way I can do that if they are camping in it. ‘It’s taken,’ I add, knowing it did nothing to soften the blow. ‘But there is plenty more, the place is huge, you will see. There is even a pool!’

Neville and Rayne glance at each other before marching down the hall heads bobbing together, whispering, not bothering to hide their annoyance with me.

You could have just given it to them, Naddalin thinks, close enough to send a charge through my veins.

I shake my head and walk silently alongside her, telepathically replying, I want to see it filled with your things. Even though they no longer mean anything to you, they mean a great deal to me. You cannot just toss out the past- cannot just turn your back on the things that defined you.

She stops, turning to me as she says, ‘ever, we are not defined by our things. It is not the clothes that we wear, the cars that we drive, the art we acquire- it is not where we live- but how we live that defines us.’ Her gaze bores into mine, as she gathers me into a telepathic embrace, the effect seeming so real, it robs me of breath. ‘It’s our actions that are remembered long after we’re gone,’ she adds, smoothing my hair as her lips telepathically meet mine.

True- I smile, enhancing the image she created with tulips and sunsets and rainbows and cupids and all manner of clichéd Dadaistic themes that make us both laugh.

Except that we are immortal, I add, decided to sway her to my side. This means none of that applies. So, with that in mind, we can just-

But I do not even get to finish before the twins call for us, shouting, ‘The room! I want one!’

Since the twins are so used to being together, I was sure they would want to share the same space and even get bunk beds or something. But the moment they checked out the size of the next room, and the one after that, they each staked their claim and never looked back. Spending the next several hours directing Naddalin and me to decorate down to their most minute specifications, demanding we manifest beds, dressers, and shelves, only to change their minds, have us empty the room, and start all over again.

But if Naddalin was using her magic, I did not complain. I was far too relieved to see her manifesting again, even if she was still refusing to manifest anything for herself. By the time we finished, the sun was starting to rise, and I knew I had better return home before Jaylynn woke up and noticed I was gone.

‘Don’t be surprised if I don’t make it to school today,’ she says, walking me to the front door.

I sigh, hating the thought of going without her.

‘I cannot leave them here on their own. Not until they get settled in.’ She shrugs, hooking her thumb over her shoulder and pointing upstairs where the twins are finally, mercifully, asleep in their beds.

I nod, knowing she is right and vowing to get them back to School soon before they get too comfortable here.

‘I’m not sure that’s the solution,’ she says, sensing my thoughts.

I squinted, unsure where she was going, but getting an uncomfortable ping in my gut, nonetheless.

‘I’ve been thinking-’ She cocks her head to the side, thumb tracing her stubble-lined chin. ‘They’ve been through a lot- losing their home, their families, everything they’ve ever know she and loved their lives taken so abruptly, they hadn’t had a chance to even live them-’ She shakes her head. ‘They deserve a real childhood, you know? A fresh start in the world...’

I gape, wanting to respond but the words just will not come. Because while I also want them to be happy and safe and all those things, as far as the rest goes, we are no longer on the same page. I was planning a short little visit, a couple of days, or at the very worst- weeks. Never once did I entertain the idea of becoming surrogate parents, especially to twins who are just a few years younger than me.

‘It was just a thought.’ She shrugs. ‘The decision is theirs. It is their life.’

I swallow hard and avert my gaze, telling myself there is nothing that must be settled just yet, heading toward my manifested car when Naddalin says, ‘Always- Seriously? A Lamborghini?’

I cringe, flushing under her gaze. ‘I needed something fast.’ I shrug, knowing she is not buying it the second I see her face. ‘They feared to be outside, so I needed to get them here quickly.’

‘And did it need to be shiny and red as well?’ She laughs, glancing between the car and me and shaking her head.

I press my lips together and look away, refusing to say anything more. I mean, it is not like I was planning to keep it. I will get rid of it the second I get home and pull into my drive.

I open the door and climb in, suddenly remembering the thing I meant to ask her before. Taking in the elegant lines of her face as I say, ‘Hey Naddalin- how would you open the door so quickly? How would you know we were here?’

She looks at me, eyes meeting mine as the smile slowly fades from her face.

‘I mean, it was four in the morning. I did not even have a chance to knock, and you were already there. Weren’t you asleep?’

-And-

Like even though a chunk of flashy red metal stands between us, it is as though she is right there, gaze sending shivers over my skin when she says, ‘Ever, I can always sense when you’re near.’

After a long day at school without Naddalin, the second the final bell rings, I get in my car and head for her house. But instead of making a left at the light, I pull an

illegal U-turn. Telling myself I should allow her some space, give her a chance to bond with the twins- when the truth is, between their hero worship of Naddalin and Rayne's glaring animosity toward me- well, I am just not ready to face them again.

I head toward downtown Laguna, figuring I will stop by Mystics and Moonbeams, the metaphysical bookstore where Ava once worked. Thinking Lina, the store's owner can help me find a solution to my more mystical problems without my divulging just what it is that I am after. Which, considering how suspicious she is, should prove to be quite a feat.

After manifesting the best parking space, I can, which is overcrowded Laguna happens to be two blocks away, I stuff the meter full of quarters and make my way toward the door, only to be met by a big red sign reading: BE BACK IN TEN!

I stand before it, lips pressed together as I glance all around, making sure no one is watching as I mentally flip the sign over while making the deadbolt retreat. Silencing the bell on the door as I slip inside and head for the bookshelves, relishing the chance to browse on my own, free of Lina's scrutiny.

The tips of my fingers graze the long row of spines, waiting for a signal, sudden warming, an itch at the tips, something to alert me to just the right one. But not getting anything, I grab one near the end and close my eyes, pressing my palms to the front and back covers, eager to see what is inside.

'How'd you get in here?'

I jump, bumping into the shelf just behind me, knocking a pile of CDs to the floor.

Cringing at the mess at my feet, scattered jewel cases everywhere, some of them cracked, as I say, 'You scared me- I-'

I drop to my knees, heart racing, face flushing, wondering not just who she is but how she could have managed to sneak up on me when it should be impossible to do so. A mortal's energy always announces itself long before its actual presence does. So, is it possible that she- is not mortal?

I sneak a quick peek as she kneels beside me, taking in her tanned skin, defined arms, and a heavy clump of golden- brown dreadlocks spilling over her shoulder and halfway down her back. Watching as she gathered the damaged jewel cases into her hands, searching for a sign that will out her as an immortal, even a rogue.

A face that is too perfect- a Faith tattoo- but when she catches me looking, her smile in a way that not only displays the most disarming set of dimples perfectly punctuating each cheek but a set of teeth that are just crooked enough to prove she is nothing like me, I say.

'You, okay?' she asks, gazing at me with eyes so green I can barely remember my name.

I nod, standing awkwardly and rubbing my palms on my jeans, wondering why I am so breathless, unnerved, forcing the words from my lips when I say, 'Yeah. I am- fine.' Inadvertently taking a nervous laugh onto the end that is so high pitched and foolish

I cringe and turn away. 'I, um- I was just browsing the merchandise,' I add, realizing just after I have said it that I have more right to be here than she does.

Glancing over my shoulder to find her gazing at me in a way I cannot read, I take a deep breath and pull my shoulders back. 'The real question is, how'd you get in here?' Taking in her sandy bare feet and wet board shorts hanging dangerously low on her hips, averting my gaze before- I can see anything more.

'I own the place.' She then nods, stacking the fallen CDs, the ones that are not cracked, back onto the shelf before turning to me.

'Really?' I turn, eyes narrowed when I add, because I happen to know the owner, and you do not look a thing like her.'

She then cocks her head to the side, squinting in faux contemplation and rubbing her chin as she says, 'Really? Most people claim to see a resemblance. Though I must admit, I am with you, never seen it myself.'

'You're related to Lina?' I gape, hoping my voice did not sound as panicked to her ears as it did mine.

'She's, my grandmother.' She nods. 'Name's Naddalin.'

She offers her hand, long, tanned, fingers extended, waiting for me. But even though my curiosity's piqued, I cannot do it. Despite my interest, despite my wondering why she makes me feel so- flustered and off-balance- I cannot risk the barrage of knowledge a single touch brings when my psyche is disturbed.

I nod, responding with the stupid, embarrassing half-wave, as I mumble my name. Trying not to wince when she gives me an odd look and lowers her hand again.

‘So, now that that’s covered-’ She slings her damp towel over her shoulder, sending a spray of sand through the room. ‘I’m back to my original question, what are you doing in here?’

I turn, feigning sudden interest in a book on dream interpretation when I say, ‘I am sticking with my original answer, which was browsing, in case you have forgotten. Surely you allow browsers in here?’ I turn, meeting her gaze- those amazing sea-green eyes reminding me of an ad for a tropical getaway. Something about them is so- indefinable- startling- and yet- strangely familiar- though I am sure I have never seen her before.

She laughs, pushing a tangle of golden dreads off her face and exposing a scar slicing right through her brow, gaze landing just to my right as she says, ‘And yet, after all the summers I’ve spent here, watching customers browse the merchandise, I’ve never once seen someone browse quite like you.’

Her lips pull at the sides, as her eyes study mine. Then I turn, cheeks hurting, heart racing, taking a moment to compose myself before turning back to say, ‘You have never seen someone browse the back cover? That is a little odd, don’t you think?’

‘Not with their eyes closed.’ She tilts her head to the side and focuses on the space to my right once again.

I swallow hard, flustered, shaky, knowing I need to change the subject before I sink any deeper. ‘Maybe you should be more concerned with how I got in here instead of what I am doing in here,’ I say, wishing I could take it back the second it is out.

She looks at me, gazes narrowed. ‘Figured I left the door open again. Are you saying I did not?’

‘No!’ I shake my head, hoping she does not notice the way my cheeks color and heat. ‘No, that’s- that is exactly what I am saying. You did leave the door open,’ I add, trying not to fidget, blink, press my lips together, or otherwise give myself away. ‘Wide open in fact, which is not only a waste of air- conditioning but totally- I’ I stop, my stomach going weird when I see the smile at play on her lips.

‘So, a friend of Lina’s, huh?’ She moves toward the register, dropping her towel on the counter in a wet, sandy thud. ‘Never heard her mention you before.’

‘Well, we weren’t exactly friends.’ I shrug, hoping it did not look as awkward as it felt. ‘I mean, I met her once and she helped me with- wait, why did you just phrase it like that? You know, all past tense. Is Lina, okay?’

She nods, perching on a stool, grabbing a purple cardboard box from a drawer, and flipping through a bunch of receipts. ‘She is on one of her annual retreats. Picks a different one each year. The time it is Mexico. Trying to decide if the Mayans were right and if the world will end in 2012. What is your take?’

She looks at me, green eyes curious, insistent, boring right into mine. But I just scratch my arm and shrug, never having heard that theory before and wondering if it

applies to Naddalin and me. Is that when we will head for the Shadowland, or will we be forced to wander barren Earth- the last two survivors responsible for repopulating the land-only- irony alert- if we touch, Naddalin dies- I shake my head, eager to escape that thread before it can take hold and mess with my head. Besides, I am here for a reason, and I need to stick with the plan.

‘So how do you know her? If you were not exactly friends.’

‘I met her through Ava,’ I say, hating the feel of her name on my lips.

She then rolls her eyes, mumbling something unintelligible and shaking her head.

‘So, you know her?’ I look at her, allowing my gaze to travel her face, her neck, her shoulders, her smooth tanned chest, making my way down to her navel, before forcing myself to look away again.

‘Yeah, I know her.’ She then pushes the box aside, gaze meeting mine. ‘Just up and disappeared the other day- into thin air from what I can tell-’

Oh, you do not know half of it, I think, carefully watching her face.

‘Called her house, her cell, but nothing. Finally did a drive-by to make sure she was okay, and the lights were on, so it is clear she has been dodging me.’ She shakes her head. ‘Left me with a bunch of angry clients, demanding a reading. Who would have thought she would turn out to be such a flake?’

Yes, who would have thought? Certainly not the person who was foolish enough to place her deepest darkest secrets right into her greedy, outstretched, hands...

‘Still, have not found anyone good enough to replace her though. And let me tell you yah, it is impossible to give readings and take care of the store. That is why I stepped out just now.’ She shrugs. ‘Surf was calling, and I needed a break. Guess I left the door open again.’

Her eyes meet mine, sparkling and deep. And I cannot tell if she honestly believes she left the door open, or if she suspects me. But when I try to peer into her head to see for myself, I am stopped by the wall she has erected to safeguard her thoughts from people like me. All I must go by is the brilliant purple aura I failed to see before- it is color waving and swaying, beckoning to me.

‘So far all I got are a stack of applications from amateurs. But I am so desperate to get my weekends back, I am ready to toss their names in a bowl and pick one just to get it over with.’ She shakes her head and flashes those dimples again.

-And-

Even though part of me cannot believe what I am about to do, the other part, the more practical part, urges me on, recognizing the perfect opportunity when it is standing before me.

‘Maybe I can help.’ I hold my breath as I wait for her reply. But when my only response is a set of narrowed lids accompanied by the slightest curling of lips, I add, ‘Seriously. You do not even have to pay me!’

She squints even further, those amazing green eyes practically disappearing.

‘What I meant was you don’t have to pay me all that much,’ I say, not wanting to come off as some weird desperate freak who gives it away for free. ‘I’ll work for just over minimum wage- but only because I’m so good I’ll be living off the tips.’

‘You’re psychic?’ She folds her arms and tilts her head back, gazing at me with complete disbelief.

I straighten my posture and try not to fidget. Hoping to appear professional, mature, someone she can trust to help run her store. ‘Yup...’ I nod, unable to keep from wincing, unused to confiding my abilities to anyone, much less a stranger. ‘I just sort of know things- the information just sort of comes to me it’s hard to explain.’

She looks at me, wavering, then focusing just to my right as she says, ‘So what exactly are you then?’

I shrug, fingers playing with the zipper on my hoodie, drawing it up and down, down, and up, having no idea what she means.

‘Is your clairaudient, clairvoyant, clairsentient, clairgustance, Clair-sent, or clairsent-agency? Which is it?’ She shrugs.

‘All of the above.’ I nod, having no idea what half those things mean, but figuring if it has anything even remotely to do with psychic abilities, then I can do it.

‘But you’re not mediumistic,’ she says, as though it is a fact.

‘I can see spirits.’ I shrug. ‘But only the ones that are still here, not the ones who’ve crossed-’ I stop, pretending to clear my throat, knowing it is better not to mention the bridge, School, or any of that. ‘- I can’t see the ones who’ve crossed over.’ I shrug, hoping she does not try to push it since that is as far as I will go.

She squints, gazes roaming from the top of my pale blond head and down to my Nike clad feet. A gaze that makes my whole- body quiver. Reaching for a long-sleeved tee stashed under the counter and yanking it over her head before she looks at me and says, ‘Well, eternally, if you want to work here, you’re going to have to pass the audition.’

Naddalin locks the front door then leads me down a short hall and into a small room on the right. I follow behind, hands flexed by my sides, staring at the peace sign on the back of her tee and reminding myself that if she does anything creepy, I can take her down quickly and make her regret the day she ever went after me.

She motions toward a padded foldable chair facing a small square table covered by a shiny blue cloth, taking the seat just opposite me and propping her barefoot on her knee as she says, ‘So, what’s your specialty?’

I gaze at her, hands folded, focusing on taking slow deep breaths while trying not to squirm.

‘Tarot cards? Runes? I Ching? Psychometry? Which is it?’

I glance at the door, knowing I could reach it in a fraction of a second, which might cause a stir, but so what?

‘You are going to give me a reading, right?’ Her gazes' levels on mine. ‘You do realize that’s what I meant by audition?’ She laughs, displaying a matching set of dimples as she swings her dreads over her shoulder and laughs some more.

I stare at the tablecloth, tracing the bumpy raw silk with my fingers, heart rising to my cheeks when I remember Naddalin’s last words, how she can always sense me, and hoping she was just saying that- that she cannot sense me now.

‘I don’t need anything,’ I mumble, still unwilling to meet her gaze. ‘All I need is a quick touch of your hand and I’m good to go.’

‘Palmistry,’ she nods. ‘Not what I would’ve expected, but okay.’ She leans toward me, hands open, palms up, ready to go.

I swallow hard, seeing the deeply etched lines, but that is not where the story lives- at least not for me. ‘I do not read ’em,’ I say, voice betraying my nervousness, as I work up the courage to touch her. ‘It is more the- the energy- I just- tune into it. That is where all the info is.’

She pulls back, studying me so closely I cannot meet her eyes. Knowing I need to just touch her, get it over with.

-And-

I need to do it now.

‘Is it just the hand, or-?’ She flexes her fingers, the calluses lining her palms rising and falling again.

I clear my throat, wondering why I am so nervous, why I feel like I am betraying Naddalin when all I am trying to do is land a job that will make my aunt happy. 'No, it can be anywhere. Your ear, your nose, even your big toe- does not matter, it all reads the same. The hand's just more accessible, you know?'

'More accessible than the big toe?' She smiles, those sea-green eyes seeking mine.

I take a deep breath, thinking how coarse and rough her hands appear, especially compared to Naddalin's whose are almost softer than mine. And somehow, even just the thought of that makes the whole moment feel off. Now that our touch is forbidden, just being alone with another guy feels sordid, illicit, wrong.

I reach toward her, eyes shut tight, reminding myself it is just a job interview- that there is no reason I cannot land the thing quickly and painlessly. Pressing my finger to the center of her palm and feeling the soft, gentle give of her flesh.

Allowing her stream of energy to flow through me- so peaceful, serene, it is like wading into the calmest of seas. So different from the rush of tingle and heat I have grown used to with Naddalin- at least until the shock of Naddalin's life story unfolds.

I yank my hand back as though I have been stung, fumbling for the amulet just under my top, noting the alarm on her face as I rush to explain. 'I'm sorry.' I shake my head, angry with myself for overreacting. 'Normally I would not do that. Normally I am more discreet. I was just a little surprised that is all. I did not expect to see anything quite so-' I stopped, knowing my inane babbling is only making it worse. 'Normally, when I

give readings, I hide my reactions much better than that.' I nod, forcing my gaze to meet her, knowing whatever I say will not hide the fact that I choked like the worst amateur.

'Seriously...' I smile, lips stretching in a way that cannot be convincing; 'I'm like the ultimate poker face.' Peering at her again and seeing she is not working. 'A poker face that is also full of empathy and compassion,' I stammer, unable to stop the runaway train. 'I mean, really- I'm just- full of it-' I cringe, shaking my head as I gather my things so I can stop for the day. There is no way hell he will hire me now.

She slides to the edge of her seat, leaning so close I struggle to breathe. 'So-o, tell me, 'She says, gazing like a hand on my wrist, holding me in place. 'What exactly did you see?'

I swallow hard, closing my eyes for a moment and replaying the movie I just saw in my head. The images are so clear, dancing before me, as I say, 'you're different.' I peer at her, her body unmoving, gaze steady, allowing no clues as to whether I am on track.

'But then, you have always been different. Ever since you were little you have seen them.' I swallow hard and avert my gaze, the image of her in her crib, smiling and waving at the grandmother who passed years before her birth now etched in my brain.

'And when-' I pause, not wanting to say it, but knowing that if I want the job, then I had better get to it. 'But when your father- shot herself- back when you were ten- you thought you were to blame. Convinced by your insistence on seeing your mother, who passed just one year before, somehow sent her over the edge. It was years before you

accepted the truth, that your father was just lonely, depressed, and anxious to be with your mother again. Even so, sometimes you still doubt it.'

I gaze at her, noting how she has not so much as flinched, though something in those deep green eye's hints at the truth.

'She tried to visit a few times. Wanting to apologize for what she did, but even though you sensed her, you blocked it. Sick of being teased by your classmates and scolded by the nuns- not to mention your foster dad who-' I shake my head, not wanting to continue, but knowing I must.

'You just wanted to be normal.' I shrug. 'Treated like everyone else.' I trace my fingers over the tablecloth, throat beginning to tighten, knowing exactly how it feels to long to fit in, all the while knowing you never truly can. 'But after you ran away and met Lina, who is not your real grandmother- your real grandparents are dead.' I look at her again, wondering if she is surprised that I knew that, but she gives nothing away. 'Anyway, she took you in, fed you, clothed you, she...'

'She saved my life.' She sighs, leaning back in her seat, long tanned fingers rubbing her eyes. 'In many ways. I was so lost and she-'

'Accepted you for who you are.' I nod, seeing the whole story before me, as though I am right there.

'And who's that?' She asks hands splayed on her knees, gazing at me. 'Who am I really?'

I look at her, not even pausing when I say, ‘A guy so smart you finished high school in tenth grade. A guy with such amazing mediumistic abilities you have helped hundreds of people and asked extraordinarily little in exchange. And yet, despite all of that, you are also a guy who’s So-o-’ I look at her, lips lifting at the corners. ‘Well, I was going to say lazy- but since I do want the job, I’ll say laid-back instead.’ I laugh, relieved when she laughs along with me. ‘And given the choice, you would never work another day. You would spend the rest of eternity just searching for that one perfect wave.’

‘Is that a metaphor?’ she asks, a crooked smile on her face.

‘Not in your case.’ I shrug. ‘In your case, it’s a fact.’

She then nods, leaning back in her chair, gazing at me in a way that makes my stomach dance. Dropping forward again, feet flat on the floor when she says, ‘Guilty.’ Eyes wistful, searching mine. ‘And now, since there are no secrets left since you have peered right into the core of my soul- I must ask, any insights into my future- a certain blonde perhaps?’

I shift in my seat a little, preparing to speak when she cuts me right off.

‘And I am talking the immediate future, as on Friday night. Will Emmah ever agree to go out with me?’

‘Emmah?’ My voice cracks as my eyes practically pop out of my head. So much for the poker face, I was bragging about.

Watching as she closes her eyes and shakes her head, those long, golden dreadlocks contrasting so nicely with her gorgeous dark skin. ‘Anastasia Pappas, aka Emmah,’ she says, unaware of my sigh of relief, thrilled to know it is some other horrible Emmah and not the one I know.

Tuning in to the energy surrounding her name and knowing right away that it is never going to happen, at least not in the way that she thinks. ‘You want to know?’ I ask, knowing I could save her a lot of wasted effort by telling her now, but doubt she wants to hear the truth as much as she claims. ‘I mean, wouldn’t you rather just wait and see how it plays?’ I look at her, hoping he will agree.

‘Is that what you’re going to say to your clients?’ She asks, back to business again.

I shake my head, looking right at her. ‘Hey, if they’re fool enough to ask, then I’m fool enough to tell.’ I smile. ‘So, the question is, how big of a fool are you?’

She pauses, hesitates for so long that I worry that I took it too far. But then she smiles, her right hand extended as she rises from her seat. ‘Fool enough to hire you. Now I know why you would not shake hands the first time around.’ She nods, squeezing my hand for a few seconds too long. ‘That’s one of the most amazing readings I’ve ever had.’

‘One of?’ I lift my brow in mock offense as I reach for my bag and walk alongside her.

She laughs, heading for the door and glancing at me when she says, ‘Why don’t you stop by tomorrow morning, say around ten?’

I pause, knowing there is no way I can do that.

‘What? Do you prefer to sleep in? Join the club.’ She shrugs. ‘But believe me, if I can do it, you can too.’

‘It’s not that.’ I pause, wondering why I am so reluctant to tell her. I mean, now that- I have a job what do I care what she thinks?

She looks at me, waiting, gazing at adding up the seconds.

‘It’s just- I have class.’ I shrug, thinking how class sounds so much older than a school like I am in college or something.

She squints, looking at me over again. ‘Where?’

‘Um, over at Bay View,’ I mumble, trying not to wince when I say it aloud.

‘The high school?’ Her eyes narrow further, newly informed.

‘Wow, you are psychic.’ I laugh, knowing I sound nervous, stupid, coming clean when I add, ‘I’m finishing my junior year.’

She looks at me for a moment too long a moment- then she turns and opens the door. ‘You seem older,’ she says, the words so abstract I am not sure if they were meant for me or her. ‘Stop by when you can. I will show you how to work the register and a few other things around here.’

‘You want me to sell stuff? I thought I was just giving readings?’ Surprised to hear my job description expanding so quickly.

‘When you are not reading, you will be working on the floor. Is that a problem?’

I shake my head as she holds the door open. ‘Just- just one thing.’ I bite down my lip, unsure how to go ahead. ‘Well, two things. First- do you mind if I go by a different name- you know, for the readings and stuff? I live with my aunt, and while she is cool and all, she does not exactly know about my abilities, so-’

‘Be whoever you want.’ She shrugs. ‘No worries. But since I need to start booking appointments, who do you want to be?’

I pause, not having thought the through until now. I wonder if I should choose Rachel after my best friend in Oregon, or something even more common like Anne or Jenny or something like that. But knowing how people always expect psychics to be about as far from normal as it gets, I gaze toward the beach and choose the third thing I see, bypassing Tree and Basketball Court as I say, ‘Avalon.’ Immediately like the sound of it. ‘You know, like the town on Catalina Island?’

She nods, following me outside as she asks, ‘And the second thing?’

I turn, taking a deep breath and hoping she will listen when I say, ‘You can do better than Emmah.’

She looks at me, gaze moving over my face, clearly resigned to the truth if not exactly thrilled to hear it from me.

‘You have a serious history of falling for all the wrong girls.’ I shake my head.

‘You do know that, right?’

I wait for a response, some recognition of what I just said, but she just shrugs and waves me away. Still watching as I head to my car, having no idea I can hear her when she thinks: Do not I know it.

The moment I pull into the drive Jaylynn calls my cell, telling me to just go ahead and order a pizza for dinner since she must work late. And even though I am tempted to tell her about my new job, I do not. I mean, I need to inform her, if for no other reason than to spare me the one she is lined up, but still, there is no way I can admit to getting the job. she will think it is weird. Even if I omit all the stuff about getting paid to give readings (and believe me, I will never dream of mentioning that) she will still think a job at a metaphysical bookstore is strange. Even silly. Who knows?

Jaylynn’s far too reasonable and rational to ever get behind such a thing. Preferring to live in a world that is sturdy and solid, that makes perfect sense, versus the real one that is anything but. And while I hate always having to lie to her, I do not see how I have much of a choice. There is just no way she can ever learn the truth about me, let alone that I will be giving readings under the code name of Avalynn.

I will just tell her I got a job somewhere local, someplace normal, like a regular bookstore, or a Starbucks. And then, of course, I will have to find a way to back the story up in case she decides to follow up on all that.

I park in the garage and head up the stairs, tossing my bag onto my bed without even looking, then heading for my closet as I yank off my tee. About to unzip my jeans when Naddalin says, 'Do not mind me, I'm just sitting here enjoying the view.' I cover my chest with my arms, my heart beating triple time as Naddalin lets out a low, sweet white and Jasmine at me.

'I did not even see you. I did not even sense you for that matter,' I say, reaching for my tee again.

'Guess you were too distracted.' She smiles, patting the space right beside her, face creasing with laughter when I pull on my shirt before joining her.

'What're you doing here?' I ask, not interested in the answer, only glad to be near her again. 'I figured since Jaylynn's working late-'

'How'd you-' But then I shake my head and laugh. Of course, she knows. She can read everyone's mind, including mine, but only when I want her to. And even though I usually leave my shield down, making my thoughts accessible for her to view, right now I just cannot. I feel like I need to explain, tell my side of the story before she can peek in my head and draw her conclusions.

'And since you did not come by after school-' She then leans toward me, eyes seeking mine.

'I wanted to give you some time with the twins.' I pull a pillow onto my belly and finger the seam. 'You know, so you could get used to being together and- stuff-' I shrug, meeting her gaze, knowing she is not buying it, not for a second.

‘Oh, we’re quite used to each other.’ She laughs. ‘I assure you of that.’ She shakes her head. ‘It has been quite a day- terribly busy and remarkably interesting, for lack of a better word. But we missed you.’ She smiles, eyes grazing over my hair, my face, my lips, like the sweetest lingering kiss. ‘It would’ve been so much better if you’d been there.’

I avert my gaze, doubting any of that is the slightest bit true. Muttering under my breath when I say, ‘I bet.’

She touches my chin, making me face her, face masked with concern when she asks, ‘Hey, what’s the about?’

I press my lips together and look away, scrunching my pillow so tight it threatens to burst, wishing I had not said anything because now I must explain. ‘I’m just-’ I shake my head. ‘I’m just not so sure the twins would agree.’ I shrug. ‘They blame me for everything. And it is not like they do not have a point. I meant-’

But before I can finish, I realize something- Naddalin is touching me.

Like touching me touching me.

For real.

No gloves, no telepathic embrace, simply good old- fashioned skin-on-skin contact- or at least, almost contact.

‘How’d you-’ I look at her, her eyes shining with laughter when she catches me gaping at her bare, gloveless hand.

‘You like?’ She smiles, grasping my arm and lifting it high, both of us watching as the thin veil of energy, the only thing separating my skin from her, pulsates between us. ‘I have been working on it all day. Nothing is going to keep me from you, ever. Nothing.’ She nods, her gaze meeting mine.

I look at her, mind racing with possibilities, of all that could mean. Enjoying the almost feel of her skin, separated only by the thinnest shroud of pure, vibrating energy, invisible to everyone but us. And while it does temper the usual rush of tingle and heart, and while it could never compare to the real thing, I miss her so much- just being with her- I will take what I can get.

I lean into her, watching the veil expand until it stretches from our heads to our toes. Allowing us to live together in the way that we used to or at least in the way that we used to.

‘Much better.’ I smile, hands roaming her face, her arms, her chest. ‘Not to mention how it’s far less embarrassing than the black leather glove.’

‘Embarrassing?’ She pulls away and looks at me, mock outrage displayed on her face.

‘Come on.’ I laugh. ‘Even you must admit it was a total fashion faux pas. I thought Jasmine was going to have a seizure every time she saw it,’ I murmur, inhaling her wonderful, warm, musky scent as I bury my face in her neck. ‘So, how would you do it?’ My lips grazing her skin, longing to taste every inch. ‘How’d you harness the magic of School and bring it back here?’

‘It’s got nothing to do with School,’ she whispers, lips at the curve of my ear. ‘It is just the magic of energy. Besides, you should know by now that everything you can do there, can be done here as well.’

I gaze at her, remembering Ava and all the elaborate gold jewelry and designer clothes she used to manifest there, and how upset she always was when they did not survive the return trip home.

But before, I can even mention it, she says, ‘While it has true that the things manifested there cannot be transferred here, if you understand how the magic works, if you truly get how everything is just made up of energy, then there is no reason you cannot manifest the same things here. Like your Lamborghini, for instance.’

‘I’d hardly call it my Lamborghini,’ I say, cheeks flushing even though it was not so long ago when she had a thing for exotic cars too. ‘The second I was done with it I sent it right back. I mean, it is not like I kept it.’

She smiles, burying her hand in my hair and smoothing the ends between the tips of her fingers. ‘In between manifesting things for the twins, I perfected it.’

‘What kinds of things?’ I ask, moving so I can better see her, at once distracted by the sight of her lips, remembering how warm and silky they once felt on mine, wondering if the new energy shield will allow us to experience that again.

‘It all started with a flat-screen TV.’ She sighs. ‘Or should I say flat screens since they ended up needing one for each of their rooms, plus another two for the den that they will share. And not long after I got them all hooked up and working, they sat down

to watch, and not five minutes in they were inundated with images of things they could not live without.'

I squinted, surprised to hear that, since the twins never seemed to care all that much about material things back in School, but that's because material things tend to lose most of their value once you can manifest whatever you want. I guess losing their magic has made them just like anyone else- longing for everything just out of their reach.

'Trust me, they're an advertiser's dream.' She smiles, shaking her head.
'Falling right into that coveted youth market of thirteen to thirty.'

'Except for the fact that you did not buy any of those things, did you? You just closed your eyes and made them appear. Hardly the same as going to the store and charging it on your credit card. Do you even have a credit card?' Never having seen her even carry a wallet, much less a pile of plastic.

'No need.' She then laughs, finger skimming the bridge of my nose before her lips meet the tip. 'But even though I didn't go out and buy all of those things as you so generously pointed out...' She smiles. 'That does not make those commercials any less effective, which was my point.'

I pull away, knowing she is expecting me to laugh, or at least say something lighthearted in reply, but I cannot. And even though I hate to disappoint her, I still shake my head and say, 'Either way, you need to be careful.' I shift my body, so my gaze can better meet her.

‘You shouldn’t spoil them so much or make them so comfortable they’re reluctant to leave.’ She squints at me, clearly not following my meaning, so I rush ahead to explain. ‘What I mean is, you need to remember that living with you is a temporary solution. Our main goal is to look after them until we can restore their magic and get them back to school, which is where they belong.’

She rolls onto her back and stares at the ceiling. Turning her face toward mine as she says, ‘About that.’

I hold my breath and look at her, my stomach dipping ever so slightly.

‘I’ve been thinking-’ Her squints. ‘Who’s to say School is where they belong?’

I balk, an argument pressing forth from my lips until she raises her finger and stops it right there.

‘Eternally, the question as to whether they return, well, don’t you think that is something they should decide? I am not sure we are the ones who should be making those choices.’

‘But we’re not choosing,’ I say, voice shrill, unsteady. ‘That is what they want! Or at least that is what they said the night I found them. They were furious with me, blaming me for the loss of their magic, for stranding them here- or at least Rayne was; Neville- well, Neville was just Neville.’ I shrug. ‘But still, are you saying that’s changed?’

She closes her eyes for a moment, before leveling her gaze back on mine. ‘I’m not sure they even know what they want at the point,’ she says. ‘They are a little overwhelmed, excited by the possibilities of being here, and yet too terrified to even step outside. I just think we should give them some time and space and keep our minds open to the possibility of them staying a little bit longer than planned. Or at least until they are fully adjusted, and better able to decide for themselves. Besides, I owe them, it is the least I can do. Do not forget they helped me find you.’

I swallow hard and avert my gaze, torn between wanting what is best for the twins while worried about the impact it will have on Naddalin and me. I mean, they have been here less than a day and I am already mourning my access to her, which is a selfish way to view two people in need. Still, I do not think you have to be psychic to know that with the two of them around, requiring all kinds of assistance, times like the- when it is just Naddalin and me- will be severely limited.

‘Is that the first time you met? In School?’ I ask, seeming to remember Rayne saying something about Naddalin helping them, not the other way around.

Naddalin shakes her head, eyes on mine when she says, ‘No, that was just the first time I had seen them in a long time. We will go back to Salem.’

I look at her, jaw dropped, wondering if she was there during the trials, though she is quick to dispel that.

‘It was just before the trouble started, and I was only passing through. They had gotten into some mischief and could not find their way home- so I gave them a ride in my carriage, and their aunt was never the wiser.’ She laughs some...

-And-

I am about to make some crappy little comment, something about her spoiling and enabling them from the very start, when she says, ‘They have suffered an extraordinarily hard life- losing everything they have ever known and loved at an incredibly young age- surely you can relate to that? I know I can.’

I sigh, feeling small, selfish, and embarrassed that I even needed to be reminded of that. I am determined to stick to the practical when I say, ‘But who’s going to raise them?’ Hoping it will seem like my concerns are far less about me and more about them. I mean, with all their unmitigated weirdness, not to mention their bizarre history, where would they go? Who could look after them?

‘We’re going to look after them.’ Naddalin rolls onto her side and makes me face her again. ‘You and I. Together. We are the only ones who can.’

I sigh, wanting to turn away, but drawn to the warmth of her all-encompassing gaze. ‘I’m just not sure we’re fit to be parents.’ I shrug, hand moving over her shoulder, getting lost in her tangle of hair. ‘Or role models, or guardians, or whatever. We are too young!’ I add, thinking it is a good and valid point, and expecting about any reaction but the laughter I get.

‘Too young?’ She shakes her head. ‘Speak for yourself! I have been around for a while, you know. Long enough to qualify as a suitable guardian for the twins. Besides.’ She smiles. ‘How hard can it be?’

I close my eyes and shake my head, remembering my feeble attempts to guide Riley both in human and ghost form, and how I failed miserably. And to be honest, I am just not sure I am up for it again. ‘You have no idea what you’re getting into,’ I tell her. ‘You cannot even begin to imagine what it is like to guide two headstrong, thirteen- year- old girls. It is like herding cats- completely impossible.’

‘Eternally,’ she says, voice low, coaxing, determined to ease my concerns and chase all the dark clouds away. ‘I know what is bothering you, believe me, I do. But it is just five more years until they turn eighteen and head off on their own, and then we will have the freedom to do whatever we want. What are five years when we have all of eternity?’

But I shake my head again, refusing to be swayed. ‘If they head off on their own,’ I say. ‘If. Believe me, there are plenty of kids who stick around the house long after that.’

‘Yes, but the difference is, you and I won’t let them.’ She then smiles, eyes practically begging me to lighten up and smile too. ‘We will teach them all the magic they will need to gain their indie pen dance and get by on their own. Then we will send ’em off and wish ’em well and go somewhere on our own.’

-And-

The way she smiles, the way she gazes into my eyes and smooths my hair off my face makes it impossible to stay mad, impossible to waste any more time on a topic like when my body's so close to her.

'Five years is nothing when you've already lived for six hundred,' she says, lips at my cheek, my neck, my ear.

I snuggle closer, knowing she is right, even though my perspective's a little different from hers. Having never spent more than two decades in any one incarnation makes five years spent babysitting the twins seem like an eternity.

She pulls me to her, arms locked tightly around me, comforting me in a way I wish could last forever. 'Are we good?' She whispers... 'Are we finished with them?'

I nod, pressing my body hard against her, having no need for words. The only thing I want now, the only thing that will make me feel better is the reassuring feel of her lips.

I shift my body, so it is covering her, conforming to the bend of her chest, the valley of her torso, the bulk near her hips. Hearts beating in perfect cadence, vaguely aware of the slim veil of energy pulsating between us as I lower my mouth to her- pressing, pushing, and kneading together- weeks of longing rising to the surface- until all I want to do is infuse my body with her.

She moans, a low primal sound coming from deep within, hands clutched at my waist, bringing me closer 'til there is nothing between us but two sets of clothes that need to be shed.

I fumble at her fly as she pulls at my tee, breath meeting in short, ragged gasps as our fingers hurry as fast as they can, unable to complete their tasks quickly enough to satisfy our need.

-And-

Just as I unbuttoned her jeans and started to slide them down, I realized we had gotten so close, the energy veil was pushed out.

‘Naddalin!’ I gasp, watching as she leaps from the bed, breath coming so heavy and fast, her words are clipped at the end.

‘Eternally - I’m-’ She shakes her head. ‘I’m sorry I thought it was safe- I didn’t realize’

I reach for my tee and cover myself, cheeks flushed, insides aflame, knowing she is right, we cannot take the risk- cannot afford to get caught up like that.

‘I’m sorry too- I think- I think maybe I pushed it away and-’ I bow my head, allowing my hair to fall into my face, feeling small and examined, sure I am to blame.

The mattress dips as she returns to my side, the veil fully restored as she lifts my chin and makes me face her again. ‘It’s not your fault- I- I lost focus- I was so caught up in you I couldn’t maintain it.’

‘It is okay. Really,’ I say.

‘No, it’s not; I’m older than you- I should have more control-’ She shakes her head and stares at the wall, jaw clenched, gaze far away, eyes suddenly narrowing as she turns back to me and says, ‘eternally- how do we know if she is even real?’

I squinted, having no idea what she meant.

‘What kind of proof do we have? How do we know Naddalin’s not just playing us, having a bit of fun at our expense?’

I take a deep breath and shrug, realizing I have no proof at all. My eyes meeting her as I replay the scene from that day, all the way to the end where I add my blood to the mix and make Naddalin drink, realizing the only proof I have is Naddalin’s extremely unreliable word.

‘Who’s to say she is even legit?’ Her eyes widen as an idea begins to form. ‘Naddalin’s a liar- we’ve no reason to trust her.’

‘Yeah, but it is not like we can test it. I mean, what if it is not a big game, what if it is legit? We cannot take the risk, can we?’

Naddalin smiles, rising from the bed and heading for my desk where she closes her eyes and manifests a tall white candle in an elaborate gold holder, a sharp silver dagger, its blade pointy and smooth, its handle encrusted with crystals and gems, and a gold-framed mirror she sets down beside them, motioning for me to join her as she says, ‘Normally I would say ladies first- but in the case-’

She holds her hand over the glass and raises the knife, placing the edge to her palm and tracing the curve of her lifeline, watching her blood flow onto the mirror, pooling, coagulating, before closing her eyes and setting the candle aflame. The wound already healed by the time she passes the blade through the blaze, cleansing, purifying, before handing it to me and urging me to do the same.

I lean toward her, inhaling deeply as I quickly slice through my flesh. At first wincing at the sharp stab of pain, then watching fascinated, as the blood pours from my palm and onto the mirror where it slowly creeps toward her.

We stand together, bodies still, breath halted, watching as two ruby red splotches meet, mingle, a coalesce- the perfect embodiment of our genetic makeup joining as one- the very thing Naddalin warned us against.

Waiting for something to happen, some catastrophic punishment for what we've both done- but getting nothing- no reaction at all.

'Well, I'll be damned-' Naddalin says, eyes meeting mine. 'It is fine! Perfectly-

Her words are cut short by the sudden spark and sizzle as our blood begins to boil, conducting so much heat a huge plume of smoke bursts from the mirror and fills up the air- crackling and spitting until the blood evaporates completely. Leaving behind only the sheerest layer of dust on a burnt-out mirror.

Exactly what will happen to Naddalin if our DNA should meet.

We gape, speechless, unsure what to say. But words are no longer necessary, the meaning is clear.

Naddalin's not playing. Her warning was real.

Naddalin and I can never be together.

Unless I pay her price.

'Well...' Naddalin nods, struggling to appear calm though her face is stricken. 'Guess Naddalin's not nearly the liar I accused her of being at least not in the case.'

'Which also means she has the antidote- and all I have to do now is-'

But I cannot even finish before Naddalin's cutting me off. 'Ever, please, do not even go there. Just do me a favor and stay away from Naddalin. She is dangerous and unstable, and I do not want you anywhere near her, okay? Just-' She shakes her head, and runs her hand through her hair, not wanting me to see how distraught she is and heading for the door as she says, 'Just give me some time to figure things out. I will think of a way.'

She looks at me, so shaken by the events she is determined to keep her distance. Manifesting a single red tulip into my newly herald palm in place of a kiss, before heading down the stairs and out my front door.

The next day, when I get home from school, Haven is on my front steps, eyes smeared with mascara, royal blue bangs hanging limply in her face, with a blanketed bundle clutched tight in her arms.

‘I know I should’ve called.’ She scrambles to her feet; the face is red and swollen as she sniffs back the tears. ‘I guess I didn’t know what to do, so I came here.’ She rearranges the blanket, showing me a solid black cat with amazing green eyes that appears very weak.

‘Is she yours?’ I glance at them, noticing how both of their auras are ragged and frayed.

‘She-’ Haven nods, fussing with the blanket and raising it back to her chest.

‘I didn’t know you had a cat.’ I squint, wanting to help but unsure what to do. My dad was allergic, so we always had dogs. ‘Is the why you weren’t at school today?’

She nods, following me into the kitchen where I grab a bottle of water and pour it into a bowl.

‘How long have you had her?’ I ask, watching as she places the cat in her lap and brings the bowl to her face. But the cat’s not the least bit interested and quickly turns away.

‘A few months.’ She shrugs, giving up on the water and smoothing the top of her head. ‘Nobody knows. Well, outside of Josh, Austin, and the house cleaner who is sworn to secrecy, but nobody else. My mom would flip. God forbid a real living thing to mess up her designer decorating scheme.’ She shakes her head. ‘She lives in my room, mostly under the bed. But I leave the window cracked so she can get out and wander around now and then. I mean, I know they are supposed to live longer if you keep ’em

inside, but what kind of life is that?' She looks at me, her normally bright sunshiny aura turned gray with worry.

'What's her name?' I peered at the cat, keeping my voice to a whisper, trying to hide my concern. From what I can see, she is not long for the world.

'Charm...' The corners of her lips lift ever so slightly as she glances at us. 'I named her that because she is lucky- or at least it seemed that way at the time. I found her just outside my window the first time Josh and I kissed. It seemed so Dadaistic.' She shrugs. 'Like a good sign. But now-' She shakes her head and looks away.

'Maybe I can help,' I say, an idea beginning to form. One I am not sure will work, but still, from what I can see I have nothing to lose.

'She is not exactly a kitten. She is an old lady now. The vet told me to keep her comfortable for as long as I can. And I totally would have kept her home since she likes it under my bed, but my mom's decision to redo all the bedrooms even though my dad's threatening to sell, and now the decorator is there, along with a realtor, and everyone is fighting, and the house is a mess.

And since Josh is auditioning for the new band, and since Jasmine is getting ready for her performance tonight, I thought I had come here.' She looks at me.

'Not that you were last choice or anything.' She cringes, realizing what she just said. 'It is just that you are always so busy with Naddalin and I did not want to bother you. But if you are busy, I do not have to stay. I mean, if she is coming over or something, I can just-'

‘Trust me.’ I lean against the counter and shake my head. ‘Naddalin’s-’ I stare at the wall, wondering just how to phrase it. ‘Naddalin’s busy these days. So, I doubt she will be visiting anytime soon.’

I glance at her and Charm, reading her aura and knowing she is even more distraught than she seems. And even though I know it is not right, ethical, or whatever, even though I know it is the circle of life and you are not supposed to interfere, I cannot stand to see my friend suffer like them, not when I have a half bottle of elixir sitting inside my bag.

‘I’m just sad.’ She sighs, scratching just under Charm’s chin. ‘I mean she has lived a good long life and all, but still. Why does it have to be so sad when it ends?’

I shrug, barely listening, mind buzzing with the promise of a new idea.

‘It is so weird how like one minute everything is fine- or even not so fine- but still, you are at least here. And then the next- gone. Like Evangeline. Never to be seen or heard from again.’

I drum my fingers against the granite counter, knowing that is not exactly true, but unwilling to refute it.

‘I guess I just do not get the point. It is like, why should you bother getting attached to anything if, A: It is never- ever going to last, and B: It hurts like hell when it is over?’ She shakes her head. ‘Because if everything’s finite, if everything has a definite beginning, middle, and end, then why even get started in the first place? What is the point when everything just leads to The End?’

She blows her bangs out of her eyes and looks at me. 'And I don't mean death-like-' She nods toward her cat. 'Although that's where we all end up no matter how hard we fight.'

I glance at her and Charm, nodding as though I am right there. Like I am just like everyone else. Waiting for my turn in a long morbid line.

'I mean death more metaphorically. In a nothing lasts forever way, you know? Because it is true, nothing is built to last. Nothing. Nothing- thing.'

'But Haven-' I start, stopping the second she shoots me a look meant to silence.

'Listen, before you try to sell me all that bright side nonsense you're just dying to spout, name one thing that doesn't end.' She narrows her gaze in a way that sets me on edge, making me wonder if she knows about me if she is trying to bait me somehow. But when I take a deep breath and look at her again, it is clear she is battling her own set of demons, not me.

'Can't do it, right?' She shakes her head. 'Unless you were going to say God, or universal love, or whatever, but that is not what I am talking about, anyway. I mean, Charm is dying, my parents are on the verge of divorcing, and, let us face it, Josh and I are going to end eventually too. And if it is purely an inevitable fact, then-' She shakes her head and wipes her nose. 'Well- I may as well take control of the situation and be the one who decides when.'

Hurt her, before she can hurt me. Because two things are for sure, A: It is going to end, and B: Someone is bound to get hurt. And why should that someone be

me?’ She looks away, nose runny, lips twisted. ‘Mark my words, from the point on, I am Skaufyceol Girl. Everything runs right off me, nothing can stick.’

I look at her, sensing there is not the whole story, but willing to take her at her word. ‘You know what? You are right. You are right,’ I say, seeing her look up in surprise. ‘Everything is finite.’ Everything but Naddalin, Naddalin, and me! ‘And you are also right that you and Josh will end at some point, and not just because everything ends as you said, but because that is just the way it goes. Most high school relationships do not make it past graduation.’

‘Is that how you see you and Naddalin?’ She picks at Charm’s blanket while looking at me. ‘That you guys won’t make it past grad night?’

I press my lips together and avert my gaze, knowing I am the world’s worst liar when I say, ‘I- I try not to think about it too much. But what I meant was, just because something ends does not mean it is a sad thing or that someone is bound to get hurt, or that it should have never happened in the first place, or whatever. Because if each step brings us to the next, then how will we ever get anywhere, how can we ever grow if we avoid everything that might hurt us?’

She looks at me, nodding only slightly, as though she sees my point but will not fully concede.

‘So-o, we have no choice but to continue, to just get out there and hope for the best. And who knows, we might even learn a thing or two along the way.’ I look at her, knowing I have not completely sold it, so I add, ‘I guess what I am trying to say is, you

cannot run away just because something will not last. You must hang in there, let it play out. It is the only way you will ever advance.’ I shrug, wishing I could be a little more eloquent, but there it is. ‘Think about it, if you didn’t rescue your cat, if you didn’t say yes when Josh asked you out- well, there’s a lot of wonderful moments you would’ve missed.’

She looks at me, still wanting to argue, but not saying a word.

‘Josh is a sweet guy, and she is crazy about you. I do not think you should throw her overboard so soon. Besides,’ I say, knowing she hears me but is not truly listening, ‘you shouldn’t make those kinds of decisions when you’re feeling so stressed.’

‘How about moving, then? Is that a good enough reason?’

‘Josh is moving?’ I squint. I had not seen that coming.

She shakes her head, scratching Charm on the spot between her ears when she says, ‘Not Josh; Me. My dad keeps talking about selling the house, but damn if she will discuss it with Austin or me.’

I look at her, tempted to peer inside her head and see for myself, but sticking to my earlier vow to allow my friends their privacy.

‘All I know for sure is that the phrase resale value comes up all the time.’ She shakes her head, looking at me when she says, ‘But you know what the means if any of them is true? It means I will not be going to Bay View next year. I will not get to

graduate with my class. I will not be going to any Orange County high school for that matter.'

'I won't let them happen,' I say, gaze locked on her. 'There is no way you are leaving. You must graduate with us-'

'Well, that's genuinely nice and all.' She shrugs. 'But I am not sure you can stop it. It is a little out of your league, don't you think?'

I glance at her and her cat, knowing it is not at all out of my league. Finding an antidote for Naddalin? Maybe. Helping my best friend stay in her zip code and save her cat? Not so much. There is plenty I can do. Plenty. But still, I just look at her and say, 'We will work something out. Just trust me, okay? You can move in here with me and Jaylynn?' Nodding as though I mean it, even though Jaylynn would never have it. But I still need to put something out there, provide comfort since it is not like I can voice what I am hoping to do.

'You'd do that?' She squints- 'Really?'

'Of course.' I shrug. 'Whatever it takes.'

She swallows hard and gazes around, shaking her head when she says, 'You know I'd never take you up on it, but still, it's nice to know that even with all our rough spots you're still my best friend.'

I squinted, having always assumed it was Malcolm, not me.

‘Well, you and Malcolm.’ She laughs. ‘I mean, I can have two best friends- an heir and a spare, as they say?’ She wipes her nose again, shaking her head when she adds, ‘I bet I look like crap, right? Go ahead, tell me, I can take it.’

‘You don’t look like crap,’ I say, wondering why she is suddenly focused on her looks. ‘You look sad. There is a difference. Besides, does it matter?’

‘It does if you’re considering whether or not you should hire me.’ She shrugs. ‘I have a job interview, but there is no way I can go looking like them. And it is not like I can bring Charm.’

I gaze at her cat, watching the life- force energy slowly slip away, knowing I must move fast before it is too late. ‘I will keep her. It is not like I am going anywhere anyway.’

She looks at me, wavering on whether she should leave her poor dead cat in my care. But I just nod, coming around to her side of the counter and lifting Charm out of her arms as I add, ‘Seriously. Just do what you need to do, and I will babysit.’ I smiled, urging her to agree.

She hesitates, glancing between me and Charm, then rummages through her oversized bag for a small, handheld mirror, before wetting her finger and clearing the mascara tracks from her cheeks.

‘I shouldn’t belong.’ She grabs a black pencil and draws a thick, smudgy line around each eye. ‘For an hour? Two at the most?’ She looks at me, trading the pencil for blush. ‘All you must do is hold her and give her some water if she wants. But she will

not. She does not want much of anything now.’ She coats her lips with a swipe of gloss and rearranges her bangs, before slinging her bag over her shoulder and heading for the door. Climbing into her car as she turns to me and says, ‘Thanks. I need the job more than you think. I need to start saving some money so I can emancipate myself like Naddalin. I am tired of the crap.’

I look at her, unsure of what to say. Naddalin’s situation is unique. Not at all what it seems.

‘And yes, I know, I will not be able to support myself in quite the same style as Naddalin, but still, I’d rather live in some crappy studio somewhere than be subject to my parents’ impulsive decisions and whirs. Anyway, you sure you are okay with them?’

I nod, hugging Charm tighter, mentally urging her to hold on, just a little bit longer, until I can help.

Haven slides her key into the ignition, the engine turning as she says, ‘I promised Naddalin I would not be late. And if I hurry, I might be on time.’ Checking her appearance in the rearview mirror as she shifts in reverse.

‘Naddalin?’ I froze my expression one of pure panic but unable to change it.

She shrugs, backing out of my drive as she calls, ‘She’s the one who scored me the interview.’ Waving as she disappears down the street, leaving me with a dead cat in my arms, and no words to warn her.

‘You can’t do it,’ she says, barely having opened the door before she is already shaking her head.

‘You don’t even know what I’m here for.’ I frown, hugging Charm tightly to my chest, wishing I had not come here.

‘The cat is dying, and you want to know if it is okay to save it and I am telling you it is not. You cannot do it.’ She shrugs, reading the situation more than my mind, which I purposely blocked so she cannot view my visit to Naddalin, which would set her on edge.

‘Do you mean cannot as in not possible? Like the elixir will not work on a feline? Or cannot as in the moral sense, as in do does not play God, always?’

‘Does it matter?’ She lifts her brow, stepping to the side and allowing me in.

‘Of course, it matters,’ I whisper, TV noise drifting down from upstairs, the twins’ daily dose of reality shows.

She heads into the den, plopping onto the couch and patting the space right beside her. And even though I am annoyed she is acting, not even giving me a chance to explain, I still join her, rearranging the blanket, hoping one look at Charm will convince her.

‘I just don’t think you should jump to conclusions,’ I say, shifting my body so I am facing her. ‘It is not as simple as you think. It is not black or white, it is mostly all gray.’

She leans toward me, gazes softening as she moves her thumb back and forth under Charm's chin. 'I am sorry, ever. Really.' She gazes at me before pulling away. 'But even if the elixir did work- which I'm not sure it would since I've never tried it on an animal before, but even if it did-'

'Really?' I looked at her, surprised to hear that. 'You've never had a pet you couldn't bear to part with?' My eyes graze over her, taking her in.

'Not one that- I couldn't bear to lose, no.' She shakes her head.

I narrow my eyes, not sure how I feel about that.

'Always, back in my day, we did not keep pets in quite the same way. And after I drank the elixir, I was not interested in owning anything that might tie me down.'

I nod, catching the way she gazes at Charm and hoping there's room to negotiate. 'Fine. No pets. I get it,' I say. 'But do you get how someone might become so attached to their kitty they can't bear to say goodbye?'

'Are you asking if I know about attachment?' She looks at me, gazes heavy, steady, fixed right on mine. 'About love, and the unbearable grief that comes when it is lost?'

I gaze down at my lap, feeling juvenile, foolish. I should have seen that coming.

'There is much more at stake than just saving a cat or granting eternal life- if there even is such a thing in the animal kingdom. The real question is, how will you

explain it to Haven? What will you tell her when she returns only to find the dead cat, she left in your care is now miraculously cured- even becoming a kitten again, who knows? How will you explain that to her?’

I sigh, not having thought about that. Had not considered that if it does work, Charm will not just be heralded, but physically transformed.

‘It is not about it not working- I’ve no clue about that. And it is not about your right to play God- you and I both know I am the last one who should judge such a thing. It is more about safeguarding our secrets. And while I know you have only the best intentions at heart, in the end, helping your friend will only ignite her suspicion. Raising questions that can never be answered simply or logically without revealing too much. Besides, Haven is already onto us, or something at least. So now, more than ever, it is important for us to lay low.’

I press my lips together, swallowing past the lump in my throat, hating that I have so many amazing tools at my disposal, all these magical abilities, but unable to use them, to help those whom I love.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says, hand hovering over my arm, hesitating to make contact until the veil comes along. ‘But as sad as it seems, it is just the natural course of events. And believe me, animals accept these things far better than people do.’

I lean into her shoulder, into her touch, amazed by her power to comfort me no matter how sad things get. ‘I just feel so bad for her- her parents are always fighting- she

might have to move- it is making her question the point of everything. Like I did when my world fell apart.'

'Always -' She starts, gazes soft, lips looming so close I cannot help but press mine against them- the moment cut short when the twins squeal their way down the stairs.

'Naddalin- Neville won't let me-' Rayne stops, standing before us, dark eyes wider than usual when she says, 'Omigod is that a cat?'

I glance at Naddalin. Since when does Rayne use words like- 'Omigod' - 'An exclamation of surprise, pleasure, dismay?'

But she just shakes her head and laughs. 'Don't get too close.' She glances between them. 'And keep your voice down. This is an extremely sick cat. I am afraid she is not exceptionally long.'

'Then why don't you save it?' Rayne asks, prompting Neville to nod in agreement, the three of us gazing at Naddalin, our eyes wide and pleading.

'Because we do not do things like that,' she says, voice stern and parental. 'That's not how it's done.'

'But you saved Ever, and she's not nearly as cute,' Rayne says, kneeling before me 'til her face is level with Charms.

'Rayne-' Naddalin starts.

But she just laughs, glancing between us when she says, ‘Just joking. You know I am joking, right?’

I look at her, knowing she is not, but not willing to press it. About to get up, wanting to get Charmed back before Haven returns when Neville kneels beside me and places her hand on Charm’s head, closing her eyes as she chants a series of indecipherable words.

‘No magic,’ Naddalin scolds. ‘Not in the case.’

But Neville just sighs and sits back on her heels. ‘It’s not like it works anyway,’ she says, still gazing at Charm. ‘She looks just like Jinx at that age, doesn’t she?’

‘Which time?’ Rayne giggles, nudging her sister as they both start to laugh.

‘We may have extended her life a few times,’ Neville says, cheeks pink as she glances at us, prompting me to look at Naddalin and think: See?

But she just shakes her head. Again- Haven?

‘Can we get a cat?’ Neville asks. ‘A black kitty like the?’ Tugging on her sleeve while gazing at her in a way that is hard to resist. ‘They are wonderful companions and particularly good around the house. What do you say? Can we? Please?’

‘It’ll help us get our magic back,’ Rayne adds, nodding at her.

I look at Naddalin, reading her expression, and knowing it is as good as done. Whatever the twins want, the twins get. It is as simple as that.

‘We’ll discuss it later,’ Naddalin says, trying a stern look, but the gesture’s empty, everyone knows it but her.

I get up from the couch and head for the door, needing to get Charmed back to the house before Haven returns.

‘Are you upset with me?’ Naddalin grasps my hand and leads me to my car.

I shake my head and smile. It is impossible to be mad at her, or at least not for exceptionally long. ‘I’m not going to lie; I was hoping you’d be on my side.’ I shrug, coaxing Charm into her carrier, before leaning against the door and pulling her close. ‘But it is not like I do not get your point. I just wanted to help Haven, that is all.’

‘Just be there for her.’ She nods, dark gaze at mine. ‘That’s all she wants from you anyway.’

She leans in to kiss me, gathering me into her arms, her hands moving over me and warming me to my core. Pulling away to gaze at me with those deep soulful eyes, the rock to my feather, my eternal partner, whose intentions are so solid and good- I can only hope she never learns of my betrayal, reneging on my promise not to visit Naddalin just after saying I would not.

She then cups my face between the palms of her hands and peers into my eyes. Sensing my mood shifts so easily it is as though they are here.

I avert my gaze, thinking about Haven, Naddalin, the cat, and all the mounting mistakes- I cannot seem to stop making. Then clearing my thoughts and shaking my head, unwilling to visit that place when I say, 'See you tomorrow?' Barely finishing the words before she leans in to kiss me again, a slip of energy pulsating between her lips and mine.

Holding the moment for as long as we can, neither of us willing to break away, until a twin chorus of, 'Ewe! Gross! Do we have to watch that?' trails from the window upstairs.

'Tomorrow-' Naddalin smiles, seeing me safely into my car before heading inside.

Everything started fine. As fine and normal as any other day. I woke up, showered, dressed, stopped by the kitchen to toss some cereal down the sink before chasing it with some OJ I had swished in a glass- my usual morning routine so Jaylynn will think I ate the breakfast she made.

Nodding and smiling the whole way to school as Jasmine complains on and on about Holt, or France, or Holt and France, as I sit there beside her, stopping, turning, speeding, slowing, chasing yellow lights, waiting for the moment when I can see Naddalin again. Knowing the mere sight of her will turn all darkness to light, even if the effect is just temporary.

But the moment- I pull into the lot the first thing I see is a mammoth-sized SUV parked right next to the space Naddalin's saving for me. And I mean mammoth, as

in big and ugly. And something about the sight of Naddalin leaning against that whale of a car fills me with dread.

‘What the hell?’ Jasmine gapes. ‘You give up riding the bus, so you can drive a bus instead?’

I climb out of my Miata, glancing between Big Ugly and Naddalin, hardly believing my ears when she starts quoting a slew of statistics about its superb safety rating and roomy back seats. I mean, I do not remember her ever once caring about the safety rating when she was chauffeuring me.

That is because- you are immortal, she thinks, sensing my thoughts as we head for the gate. But may I remind you, the twins are not, and since they are now in my care, it is my job to keep them from being harmed.

I shake my head, gaze narrowed as I try to think of a snappy reply. My thoughts are interrupted by Haven who says, ‘You’re doing it again.’ She crosses her arms and glances at us. ‘You know, your whole, weird, pseudo telepathy thing.’

‘Who even cares about that?’ Jasmine screeches. ‘Naddalin’s driving a bus!’ She hooks her thumb over her shoulder, jabbing toward the big, black monstrosity and wincing at the sight of it.

‘Is it a bus or a mom car?’ Haven squints, shielding her eyes from the sun. Glancing at each of us. ‘Whatever it is, one thing’s for sure, it’s tragically middle-aged.’

Jasmine nods fully warmed up to the subject now. 'First the glove and now the?' She frowns at Naddalin, disappointment clouding her face. 'I have no idea what you are up to, but man, you are seriously losing your edge. You are not even close to the rock star you were when you first came to the school.'

I glanced at her; eyes narrowed in silent agreement. But Naddalin just laughs, too concerned with the proper care and feeding of the twins to bother with what anyone thinks- including me. And while that is the way a good, responsible, parental- type figure should think, something about it bugs me.

Jasmine and Haven continue, teasing Naddalin about her new, surprisingly stodgy ways, as I tag along, a sliver of energy pulsating between us as she grabs my hand and thinks, what is going on? Why are you acting like them? Is the because of the cat? I thought you understood all of that?

I stare straight ahead, focused on Jasmine and Haven, sighing loudly as I mentally reply: It is not the cat. We settled that yesterday. She is back at Haven's, marking her days. It is just well, it is like, here I am, making myself crazy, trying to find a solution so we can be together, and all you seem to care about is manifesting HDTV's and the world's ugliest babyproof car so you can cart the twins around town! I shake my head, knowing I need to stop before I go any further and have something to regret.

'Everything's changing,' I say, not realizing I said it aloud until the words ring in my ears. 'And I am sorry if I am acting like a brat, but I am just so frustrated that we cannot be together in the way that we want. And I miss you. I miss you so bad I cannot

stand it.' I pause, eyes stinging, throat hot and tight, threatening to close completely.

'And now that the twins are living with you, and with my new job starting and all, well, it is like, we are suddenly thrust into the super stressful, middle-aged life. And trust me, seeing your new car just now did not help.'

I peer at her, thinking there is no way I am riding in that thing. Instantly ashamed when I see her looking at me with such love and compassion, I cannot help but fold. 'I was hoping the summer would be great, you know? I was hoping we could have some fun- just the two of us.

But now it is not looking so good. And, just to top things off, did I even mention that Jaylynn is dating Milley? My history teacher? Friday night, dinner at eight!' I scowl, hardly believing the pathetic life belongs to a powerful, newly immortal, seventeen- year- old girl.

'You got a job?' She stops in place as her eyes search mine.

'Out of everything I just said that's what you're focusing on?' I shake my head and pull her along, laughing despite myself.

But she just looks at me, gazes fixed on mine as she says, 'Where?'

'Mystics and Moonbeams.' I shrug, watching Jasmine and Haven wave as they turn down the hall and head for class.

'Doing what?' she asks, not ready to drop it just yet.

‘Retail stuff, mainly.’ I gaze at her. ‘You know, working the register, restocking shelves, giving readings, stuff like that.’ I shrug, hoping she will not pay much attention to that last part.

Psychic readings? She gapes, stopping just shy of our classroom.

I nod, staring longingly at my classmate’s spill through the door, preferring to join them than having to finish what I started.

‘Do you think that is smart? Drawing that kind of attention to yourself?’ Back to talking again now that we are alone in the hall.

‘Probably not.’ I shrug, knowing it is most definitely not. ‘But Jaylynn insists the discipline and stability will do me some good. Or so she says. She just wants to watch me. And short of installing a babysitter cam, that is the easiest, least invasive way. She even had the horrible, soul-sucking, nine- to- five gigs all set up and ready to go, so when Naddalin said she needed some help around the store, well, I did not have much choice but to what?’ I pause, seeing the look on her face, eyes guarded, hard to read.

‘Naddalin?’ Her eyes narrowing to where I can just barely see them. ‘I thought you said someone named Lina owned the store.’

‘Lina does own the store. Naddalin’s her grandson,’ I say, only that is not entirely true. ‘Well, she is not her real grandson, it is more like, she looks after her. Helped raise her after she runs away from her last foster home- or- whatever.’ I shake my head. The last thing I wanted was to start a conversation about Naddalin, especially with the way Naddalin’s gone high alert. ‘I thought it might help, you know, allow unlimited

access to books and things that might help us. Besides, it is not like I am working there under my real name. I am using an alias.'

'Let me guess.' She peers into my eyes, seeing the answer displayed in my thoughts. 'Avalynn. Cute...' She smiles, but only briefly before she has gone seriously again. 'But you know how it works, right? It is not like a confessional where you are shielded by a screen. People expect face-to-face contact. They want to see you know whether they can trust you. So, what exactly are you planning to do when someone you know just happens to walk in for an impromptu tarot card reading? Did you even think about that?'

I frown, wondering why she must take what I thought was a good deal and turn it into a problem. And I am about to deliver some snappy reply, say something like- Hello? I am a psychic. I will know before they even get through the door! when Naddalin appears.

Naddalin and- someone else- someone vaguely familiar- someone named Marco who was last seen in a vintage Jaguar, pulling up to her house.

Walking side by side, legs moving swiftly, eyes focused on mine. Naddalin's gaze taunting, mocking, the proud owner of my dirty little secret.

Naddalin moves to shield me, gaze on Naddalin as she thinks: Stay calm. Do not do a thing. I will handle them.

I peer over her shoulder, watching as Naddalin and Marco barrel toward us like an oncoming train. Gazing at me with eyes so deep, so blue, everything blurs but her

moist grinning lips and flashing Ouroboros tattoo. And the last thing I think, before I am sucked in completely, is that the is my fault. If I had kept my promise to Naddalin and stayed away from her, I would not be facing the now.

Her energy swirls toward me, tugging, pulling, luring me in, sucking me into a spiral of darkness, bombarding me with images of Naddalin- the tainted antidote- my ill-advised visit- Haven- Malcolm- France- the twins- all of it coming so quickly I can barely distinguish between them. But the individual images themselves are not important- it is the whole she wants me to see. All of it meant to illustrate one single thing: Naddalin's in charge now- the rest of us are just puppets, pulled by her strings.

'Morning,' mates!' She sings, releasing me from her grip as my body falls limp against Naddalin's.

But despite her sweet murmurings as she ushers me away from Naddalin and into the room, despite the soft reassurances intended to soothe, convinced that we have just dodged a bullet and it is over, for now, I happen to know it is only begun.

More is coming.

There is no doubt.

Naddalin's next shot is aimed solely at me.

After lunch, I head for Mystics and Moonbeams. I am eager to start my on-the-job training, hoping it will provide a nice distraction from the mess otherwise known as my life.

It was bad enough when Naddalin kept disappearing between classes so she could check in on the twins, but by lunch, when I assured her, I was fine, that Naddalin would not bother me, and that she should just stay home, I headed for our table only to learn that Haven has boarded the Naddalin train. Picking apart a vanilla- frosted cupcake while gushing about the big part she played in securing her the job at the vintage store, despite her arriving at the interview ten minutes late.

And all I could do was mumble an occasional word of dissent, which did not go over so well. So, after her third excruciatingly dramatic eye roll, after telling me to relax and unclench for the umpteenth time, I tossed my uneaten sandwich and made for the gate. Vowing to keep an eye on her, do whatever it takes to keep them from getting together. Just one more item on my growing to-do list.

I pull into the alley, parking in one of two spaces behind the store before heading toward the front, half expecting to find the door locked, figuring Naddalin could not resist the call of killer waves on such a beautiful day and surprised to find it wide open, with Naddalin behind the register, ringing a sale.

‘Oh hey, here’s Avalynn now.’ She nods. ‘I was just telling Susan about our new psychic reader, and you walk in on cue.’

Susan turns, looking me over, scrutinizing, accessing, adding up all the parts in her head. Sure, she aced the equation when she says, ‘Aren’t you a little young to be giving readings?’ She gives me a smug look.

I smile, an awkward slanting of lips, as my gaze darts between them, unsure how to respond, especially with the way Naddalin's looking at me.

'Being psychic is a gift,' I mumble, nearly choking on the word. Remembering a time, not long ago, when I scoffed at the thought, sure it was anything but. 'It's got nothing to do with age,' I add, watching her aura flicker and flare, knowing I have failed to convince her. 'You either have it, or you don't.' I shrug, digging myself a very deep hole.

'So, should I book you reading?' Naddalin asks, smiling in a way that is hard to resist. But not for Susan; shaking her head and clutching her bag, she heads for the door, saying, 'You just give me a call when Ava comes back.'

The bell clangs loudly as the door closes behind her. 'Well, that went well.' I shrug, turning toward Naddalin and watching her file the receipt before adding, 'Is my age going to be a problem here?'

'You sixteen?' she asks, barely glancing at me.

I press my lips together and nod.

'Then you are old enough to work here. Susan's a psychic junkie, she will not resist for long. she will be on your sign- up sheet before you know it.'

'Psychic junkie? Is that anything like a groupie?' I follow her to the office in the back, noticing she is wearing the same trunks and peace- sign tee as before.

‘Can’t make a move without consulting the cards, the stars, what have you.’

She nods some. ‘Though I’m guessing you gathered your share of regulars during all the readings you’ve given.’ She glances over her shoulder as she opens the door, eyes narrowed, knowing, in a way I cannot miss.

‘About that-’ I start, figuring I may as well confess since she is on to me anyway.

But she just turns, hand raised, decided to stop me when she says, ‘Please, no confessionals.’ Smiling and shaking her head. ‘If I have any hope of enjoying those huge swells out there, then I do not have the luxury of regretting my decision. Though you might want to rethink that bit about it being a gift.’

I look at her, surprised to hear her say that since all the psychics I have met, which, okay, consists of just Ava, but still, most of them think it is most certainly something you are born with.

‘I’m thinking of adding some classes to the schedule, psychic development stuff, maybe even throw in some Wicca as well, and trust me, we’ll get a lot more sign-ups if everyone thinks they have a fair shot.’

‘But do they?’ I ask, watching as she heads for an extremely messy desk and riffles through a pile of papers near the edge.

‘Sure-’ She nods, picking up a sheet, looking it over, then shaking her head as she swaps it for another. ‘Everyone has the potential; it is just a matter of developing it.

With some it comes easy, they could not ignore it if they tried, with others- they must dig a little deeper to find it. And you? When did you know?’

She looks at me, those sea-green eyes meeting mine in a way that makes my stomach dance. I mean, one minute he is talking abstractedly, thumbing through papers as though she is barely minding her words, then the next everything stops, her gaze is on mine, and it is like time has stood still.

I swallow hard, unsure what to say, part of me longing to confess, knowing she is one of the few who would understand, but the other part resists- Naddalin’s the only one who knows my story, and I feel like- I should keep it that way.

‘Just born with it, I guess.’ I lift my shoulders, cringing at the way my voice rose at the end. My eyes dart around the room, hoping to avoid the topic as well as her gaze when I add, ‘So- classes; who are teaching those?’

She shrugs, tilting her head in a way that allows her dreadlocks to fall into her face. ‘Guess I will,’ she says, pushing them back and revealing the scar on her brow. ‘It is something I have been wanting to do for a while anyway, but Lina’s always been against it. I figure I may as well take advantage of her not being there to see if it works.’

‘Why’s she against it?’ I ask, stomach-settling when she leans back and props her feet on her desk.

‘She likes to keep it simple- books, music, angel figurines, with the occasional reading thrown in. Safe. Benign. Mainstream mysticism where no one gets hurt.’

‘And your way? People get hurt?’ I study her, trying to pinpoint just what it is about her that sets me on edge.

‘Not at all. My goal is to empower people, help them live better, more fulfilled lives, by accessing their intuition, that is all.’ She glances at me, green eyes catching me staring, making my stomach go weird again.

‘And Lina doesn’t want to empower people?’ I ask, feeling all fluttery under her gaze.

‘With knowledge comes power. And since power tends to corrupt, she thinks it is too big a risk. Even though I have no plans to go anywhere near the dark arts, she is convinced they will find their way in, that the classes I teach will only lead to harder, darker stuff.’

I nod, thinking of Naddalin and Haven and seeing Lina’s point. Power in the wrong hands is indeed a dangerous thing.

‘Anyway, you interested?’

My eyes meet her, unsure of what she means.

‘In teaching a class?’

I balk, wondering if she is joking or serious, then seeing she is neither, just putting it out there. ‘Trust me, I do not know the first thing about Wicca, or- or any of it. I’ve no idea how it works. I am better off just giving the occasional reading, and even

trying to organize the mess.’ I gesture toward her desk, the shelves, about every available surface that is buried beneath a mound of papers and junk.

‘I was hoping you’d say that.’ She laughs some. ‘Oh, and just so you know, I clocked out the moment you walked in. Gone surfing if anyone asks.’ She gets up, moving toward the surfboard leaning against the far wall. ‘I do not expect you to get it completely organized or anything, it is too big a mess. But if you could get it into order, well-’ She nods, looking at me. ‘You just might get a gold star.’

‘I’d rather have a plaque,’ I say, pretending to be serious. ‘You know, something nice that I can hang on the wall. Or even a statuette. Or a trophy- a trophy would be good.’

‘How about your parking space outback? I can swing that.’

‘Trust me, you already have.’ I laugh.

‘Yeah, but the one will have your name on it. Reserved for you only. No one will be allowed to park in it, not even off-hours. I will post a big warning that reads: CAUTION! THE SPACE RESERVED FOR AVALYNN ONLY. ALL Other’s WILL BE TOWED AWAY AT THEIR OWN EXPENSE.’

‘You would do that? For real?’ I laugh, eyes meeting her

She grabs her board, fingers gripping the edge as she heaves it under her arm. ‘You get the place cleaned up and there is no limit to the rewards that await you. Today

Employee of the Month, tomorrow-' She shrugs, tossing her dreads off her forehead and exposing her amazingly cute face.

Our gazes locked, and I know she has caught me again- caught me looking- wondering- thinking she is cute. So, I quickly look away, scratching at my arm, fiddling with my sleeve, anything to move past the moment toward something less awkward.

'There's a monitor in the corner there.' She nods toward the far wall, back to business again. 'That, combined with the bell on the door, should alert you to anyone coming in when you're working back here.'

'That, the bell on the door, and the fact that I'm psychic,' I say, trying to sound lighthearted, though my voice is a little shaky, having not fully recovered from the awkwardness before.

'Like the way, you accessed your powers when I snuck up on you?' she asks, smiling in a nice open way, though her eyes are holding back.

'That was different.' I shrug. 'You know how to shield your energy. Most people do not.'

'And you know how to shield your aura.' She squints, head cocked to the side, those golden dreadlocks falling halfway down her arm as she focuses in on my right. 'But I'm sure we'll get to that later.'

I swallow hard, pretending not to notice how her vibrant yellow aura goes a little pink at the edges.

‘Anyway, it is all self-explanatory. The files need to be alphabetized, and if you could separate ’em by subject, that would be great. Oh, and do not bother tagging the crystals or herbs if you are not familiar with them, I would hate to get ’em confused. Though if you are familiar-’ Her smiles, brow raised in such a way I immediately start scratching my arm again.

I gaze at the gleaming piles of crystals, some of which I recognize from the elixirs I made and the amulet I wear at my neck, but most of which are so foreign they are not even vaguely familiar.

‘Do you have a book or something?’ I ask, hoping she does since I would love to learn more about their amazing abilities. ‘You know, so I can’- Find a way to sleep with my immortal boyfriend someday- so I can get them all tagged properly-And- stuff.’ I nod, hoping to appear like a hard worker rather than the self-motivated slacker I am. Watching as she drops her surfboard and turns back toward her desk, shuffling through a pile of books and retrieving a small, thick, well- worn tome from the bottom of the stack.

Turning it over in her hands, and gazing at the back when she says, ‘The has it all. If a crystal’s not in it, it does not exist. It is also loaded with pictures, so you can identify them. Anyway, it should help,’ she adds, tossing it to me.

I catch it between the palms of my hands, its pages vibrating with life as the contents surge through me. The entire book now imprinted on my brain as I smile and say, ‘Believe me, it already has.’

I stare at the monitor, making sure Naddalin has left before taking the seat behind the desk and gazing at the pile of crystals. Knowing the book alone was not enough- they need to be handled to be understood. But just as I reach for a large red rock marked by streaks of yellow, my knee knocks against the side of the desk, and my entire body grows itchy and warm- a sure sign that something needs my attention.

I push the chair back and lean forward, peering under the desk, noticing how the sensation grows stronger the lower I go. Following the feeling, until I slid off my seat and dropped to the floor, fumbling around for the source, the tips of my fingers growing unbearably hot the second I touched the bottom left drawer.

I lean back on my heels, squinting at the old brass lock- the kind of deterrent meant to keep honest people honest and dissuade those who do not know how to manipulate energy like me- closing my eyes as I ease the drawer open, only to find a pile of hanging files that are no longer hanging, an ancient calculator, and a pile of old and yellowed receipts. About to close it again when I sense the false bottom beneath.

I scoop up the papers and toss them aside before lifting the hatch and exposing an old, worn, leather-bound tome, its pages curled and fraying like a lost ancient scroll, the words Book of Shadows inscribed on its front. I place it on the desk before me, then sit there and stare. Wondering why someone would go to so much trouble to keep the book hidden- and from whom?

Is Lina hiding it from Naddalin?

Or is it the other way around?

-And-

Since there is only one way to find out, I close my eyes and press my palm to its front, planning to read it in my usual way until I am slammed by a surge of energy so intense, so frenetic, so chaotic- it practically snaps crackles my bones.

I am hurled backward, my chair hitting the wall with such force it leaves a huge dent. The flickering remnants of random images still quivering before me and knowing full well why it was hidden- it is a book of witchcraft and spells. Divinations and incantations. Containing powers so potent it would be completely catastrophic in the wrong hands.

I steady my breath and stare at the cover, calming myself before I attempt to thumb through it. Fingers twitching, touching only the edges, as I peer at a cursive so small it is impossible to decipher. The bulk of the pages inscribed with all manner of symbols, reminding me of the alchemical journals Naddalin's father used to keep- carefully written in code to protect the secrets within.

I flip to the middle, taking in a fine, detailed sketch of a group of people dancing under a full moon, followed by those of similar people engaged in complex rituals. Fingers hovering above the scratchy old paper and suddenly knowing deep in my bones that it is no mistake. I was meant to find the book.

Just like Naddalin hypnotized my classmates and put them all under her spell, all I should do is weave the right incantation to convince her to divulge the information I need!

I turn the page, eager to find the right one, just as the bell on the shop door rings and I peer at the monitor to confirm it. Unwilling to budge 'til I am sure they are not going to turn right around and leave, that they are deeply committed to staying. Watching as the small, slim, black-And- white figure makes her way through the room- nervously glancing over her shoulder as though expecting to find someone there. And just as I am hoping she will leave, she goes straight to the counter, places her hands on the glass, and waits patiently.

Great- I got up from the desk. Just what I need a customer. Calling, 'Can I help you?' Before I had even had a chance to turn the corner and see that it was Jewell.

The second she sees me she gasps, jaw-dropping, eyes widening, appearing-frightened? The two of us gape at each other, wondering how to move past them.

'Um, do you need something?' I say, voice sounding more confident than I feel, as though I am in charge around here. Taking in her long dark hair, the recent addition of copper streaks glinting under the lights, realizing I have never seen her alone until now. Never once been confronted by her, just the two of us, without Emmah or Mireille.

My mind wanders to the book in the back, the one I left on the desk, the one I need to return to at once, hoping whatever it is that she wants can be handled quickly and easily.

'Maybe I'm in the wrong place.' She pulls her shoulders in, twisting a silver ring around and around as her cheeks spot bright pink. 'I think I-' She swallows hard and

glances back at the door, motioning awkwardly as she says, 'I made a mistake, so I'm- I'm just going to go-'

I watch as she turns, her aura glowing a tremulous gray as she heads for the door. And even though I do not want to do it, even though I have a potential life-changing, problem- solving book to return to, I say, 'It's not a mistake.' She stops, shoulders hunched, looking small and diminutive without the aid of her bully friend. 'Seriously,' I add. 'You meant to come here. And who knows? I can help.'

She takes a deep breath, pausing for so long I am about to speak again when she turns. 'There's the guy.' She picks at the hem of her shorts and gazes at me.

'Naddalin.' Sensing the answer without reading her thoughts or touching her skin, just knowing the moment my eyes meet her.

'Yeah, um, I guess. Anyway, I um-' She shakes her head and starts again. 'Well, I was just wondering if she was here. She gave me the.' She pulls a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket and lays it flat against the glass, smoothing the creases as she peers up at me.

'She's not here,' I mumble, eyes grazing over the flyer advertising her Psychic Development Class level 1, thinking how she wasted no time. 'You want to leave a message? Or sign up?'

I then study her carefully, never- ever having seen her so shy and uncomfortable before- with the ring twisting, eye darting, knee twitching- and knowing it is because of me.

She shrugs, gazing down at the counter as though fascinated by the jewelry inside. 'No, um, do not say anything. I will just come back some other time.' She takes a deep breath and pulls her shoulders back, trying to summon some of the usual revulsion reserved just for me, but failing miserably.

-And-

Even though part of me wants to soothe her, calm her, convince her there is no reason to act like them- I do not. I just watch as she leaves, making sure the door closes behind her before heading back to the book.

I do not think you ever really fall out of love with someone. I think when you fall in love, like true love, it is love for life. All the rest is just experienced and delusions.

Partition: 3

(Back to Black, and the paper)

And Scary- looking' fang, indeed? said Stan, who had been watching Naddalin read.

Then she- murdered thirteen people ha? said Naddalin, hand sing she- page back to Stan, And with one curse?

-And-

Yep, said Stan, in front of witnesses and all.

It was in broad daylight even.

Big trouble it caused said Ern darkly, didn't it, Ern? She said not long after, to Stan who was looking over at her adjacent sitting within also in the same booth, Stan swiveled in his armchair, his hands on the- back- better to look at Naddalin.

-And-

Besides Black encourages a big supporter of- You- Know- O-oo, she- said.

Then said Naddalin, without thinking. And what about, Ava? Even Stan's pupils went white- as if dark energy when in him; and was being controlled by another person.

Then the train jerked back so hard that a whole farmhouse had to jump aside what looked like to the one side to avoid being streamed over with the darkness- still on top of it with the lamp beam in front shining upon it, and then looking again the farmhouse was Nevaeh's old home, as we make our way to yet another porthole to the other side. And as Emmah said, it feels a whole lot safer when inside a vehicle.

And you ought to be glad you are in here and not thinking you are being run over by it, he said- I knew a girl? She was nuts!!!...yelped Stan...

Sorry, said Naddalin hastily, but I know her too and it is not all how you make her out to be, she was in an accident, and traumatized by it, not mental. And Sorry, I - I forgot - that you know everyone... and everything.

...And forgot- that you were just another dumb boy! Besides, she said weakly.

And Joannah, my' heart is going' that fast... overall of this... one being over you too, two being over the rail line being all crazy, and three being over all the news of Black.

-And-

So-o, - so Black was a supporter of the mother and her girls?

And Naddalin prompted apologetically, said I do not think So-o.

And yes, and said Stan, still rubbing her chest, he is and was, and still is I feel, sorry to disagree with you.

And yes, that is right, now that you feel that way?

He is close to them even related- by blood.

Partition: 4

They say... anyway when little Naddalin- got her- better of You- Know-'O-oo- the mother of the four girls. And ava's object of desire- forever, NEVER- EVER letting going of her longing for lust- and love, even if... even if she has no looks at the former girl she once was. Therefore, she called the tower to see her the tarot card... the show's a formidable force to be reckoned with, the mother then?

'Yes!'

Then - Naddalin nervously flattened her bangs down again - 'And All- You- Know-' Oo's supporters were tracked down, wasn't they, Stan?

Most of 'em knew it was all over, when- You- Know-'O-o-o went absent for both worlds, and they came silently for years. Like us, we knew she was planning and was up to no good.

But not Tirus Black.

I heard her- thought I would be second- in- command once You- Know-'O-o' taken over your mind body and soul. But no- it went down her side of the family more than his- Chiaz Naztherth, somehow Emmah would have been a little niece, why she was also tinted by the evil hands of the hex of the girl's family and mother, some say that Emmah was Chiaz unborn child, a child that he never had, that only lived for 48 hours (about 2 days), within Nevaeh, and passed, over running out of the air, she was baby number two, also a hex within the family ever baby that is number two passes. Yet this was never really talked about, Jaylynn's death was more heart barking.

-And-

Anyway, they cornered Black in-the-middle of a street full of humans and Black took out his revenge on the would kill all that was in his path and blasted 'em right in the- street all apart brain splatted the roadway, and a wizard got it to see it all, that wizard was- Naddalin dad, who understood the why... of it all, know it was the hex, nothing more nothing less, it took over his mind, she um- his little girl in pain always.

-A reporter for the press said about her story after her death- in not so many words. 'Someone like Nevaeh- if they believe in the supernatural, that she was losing her

wit and mind. it was said to me that she says- Ghost's- OOO- HA!' AND HIS HANDS SHOOK MUCKING HER.

Hum so maybe that unborn child was a hunt for years- that she was is in the glass that leads to the other side, the mother was seeing her baby, maybe that it- she was never crazy- said Naddalin swiftly.

Their typewriter print out would give the clues to that also, matching her story.

'Horrible, eh? And you know what Black did then? And Stan continued in a dramatic whisper.

And what are you trying to say? Said Naddalin.

Then laughed, Stan, and just stood there and laughed. It is a good thing I like you for you said Naddalin or I would walk away now and not look back. 'Hell- you have your head so far up your ass, you need to fart to breath!'

And when reinforcements from the- Bureau of Magic got there are everything went quiet as everything, went still all quite in its place of, closes to mad he is or surpasses, indeed, Ern? Indeed, mad he is they say, and I say too.

-And-

Besides If she- weren't when they- went to Dizeryland, she- would be now, said Ern in her slow voice, so you could not remember this, as you could you? So, you must be her... aren't you?

‘I must- then- if you say so...’

‘I say so- 0o...’

...Confess!!!

Besides like- I would blow myself up before I set foot in that place, said Emmah, and undoubtedly, they all agreed. Serves him right, to have been locked up for whipping innocent people down mind you... after what he- did... was so heinous that I can wrap my mind around it.

‘Heinous-’ Think of treason, torture, the bashing of babies such as children shot at point black rage in the freaking head- he did not care most over them were under the age of 14. She yells’ hurling her hands about!

-And-

They had a job covering it up, of the fact he was one of them, didn't they?

Then and there- said Stan.

And ‘whole street blown up and all of them nonmagical peoples dead, Dariez said in her small-town talkative way that only she could- with babbling in- between. Ern- What was it they said joining in? ‘No!’

They said thinking she had no place in the conversation, now’s he is out to do it again- and we could be his next manslaughter, said Stan, investigative-ly retelling the newspaper... moving text and picture.

An explosion, groaned Evelyn with her truly light blonde hair and blue eyes say- we overheard her saying- in a soft sweet voice- 'I am glad that love, is like- now a thing- ie again like along with like- feeling and is no longer band to the world we live, it was said there was a time that love was forbidden.

...Of course!

Thought Naddalin, not saying anything just overhearing, think poor girl is here over not feeling or having love, and wanted to go back and life live as if she could have. Black's gaunt face again is making me want to spit out my coffee.'

There has never- ever been a breakout from the prison before... God, they are even placed on a rock Island with sheer drop-offs on all sides.

'How did he get a boat...?'

They knew about it and let him out? Ern questioned.

Beats me how we did it, said Dariez all frightened, eh.

Mind you, I cannot understand to think that he would have some within the wall of the jail a guard even remotely bribed, to make this kind of escape. "Eh," said Ern?

-And-

Evelyn suddenly shivered, asking if he was here, or even within one of us?

And talk about meeting different faces, what if that face is his, yet looks like Stan, there is a good child; that you just met.

Those guards give me the- collywobbles.

-And-

Stan put the- paper away reluctantly, And Naddalin leaned against the- the window of the- Knight train, and sighed, feeling worse than ever in her given lives. She- could not help imagining what Stan might be telling the passengers in a few nights' time, about her even, she was still the same old girl so paranoid and trusting no one.

And hear about this and that and no- truths-? And about me being someone I am not, and then some I might be.

Killed up his aunt, family grandmother, and six little ones! Along with all those others... my- God!

We admire all the gossip on the- Knight train, didn't we that go down into the otherworld- the underworld of all things lovely in its dark whimsical, ghoulish, and magical, do we not Ern? Whom- was sitting in the next booth over at this point chipping in now and then on the ride.'

He was trying' to run for it... and found the tracks of the magic railways, and made it, by getting so far and become one of us- I just know it- I just know, said Naddalin.

-Then-

Formerly, Naddalin had broken wizard law just like Tirus Black, saying that she was for helping a girl on the outside of the world, yet it was all for the right reasons.

Over the aunt uncle bad enough she was charged with 1,500 dollars in having a lawyer, and a mug- shot- and fingerprints? Nothing came out of help Dariez thoughts in her mind.

Her hand so tiny they thought she was underage... said the judge, he even said you are like a child.

Naddalin did not know anything about the- prisoner- yet, looking back in her mind and thoughts remembering her own life as the girl in the story and her times sitting in a jail cell over them, on rations, though everyone she had ever heard speaks too did not want to remember or was withheld from remembering So-o in the- same fearful tone, of pretending not too, even if they looked deep into their thoughts to remember all this; the memory was altered.

She replayed to that saying and to think, that everyone then that thought they knew you thought you that you did nothing but lay around with your fingers in your puss, said Dariez.

Well, you are damned one way or the other in that hometown- you do one thing and is said to be another is another you say one thing and they think your another- if you do or do not it now and with or as they want to see and read it to be in their low comprehension and mental existence- or lacking one...

...A life and brain said the girls unanimously filling the end of the sentence!

Confess!!! Said the girl in her face noses almost touching.

Remember this- 'It's just all right to have some defecated in your mouth and you have to swallow it, yet don't you dare say anything back, they will not take your shit.' Said Naddalin.

I am not- entitled to a mistake, no one ever at any age for 3 and up, I cannot have one! Best to remember that also... when questioning the why- of it all. I cannot take the blame for my past when my soul was sold agents my well and I had no say- in the matter- of whatever fact they said for the day or week to week contracts.

And so-o in saying all that, I cannot say that I am or not.

~*~

'At the school for girl's gamekeeper, had spent two months there only last year, showing girls what could happen if they're bad- or bad- er' then bad.' Said Dariez using poor English as only she could...

Naddalin would not soon forget the- look of terror on Emmah and some of the other girl's faces when she- had been told where she- was going, and Emmah was one of the- bravest people Naddalin knew. She was going there... if she did not change her ways... and spending the night might just make her love life that she was given, and not complain, about seeing the thing go her way- even if that is playing God or destiny. Even if you have power now over that too by being here you do not always- have all the cards to play. Even if there is a thing as hell's purgatory, you need to see the light- to either go up or down. Or be happy here with all of us that love you!

The- Knight train rolled through the- darkness, scattering bushes and trashcans, junked cars, windmills, telephone booths and trees alike, on its old winding path hidden in all the tall grasses, you could not even see the track or rail ties, as she was laying on her bed looking out that arched windows of the Pullman car, there Naddalin lay, restless and miserable, on a single bed with her sheets jumbled around her.

Partition: 5

I look at my (Retro Style) Flip Desk Shelf Clock and think about home, and think that time does not mean a thing here...

Stan is over there singing- 'you put your penis in, and you put your penis out, you put your penis back in, and then have her shake it all about; you do the sex together and turn her back around, and that's what it is all about!'

The girls in the train car are rolling their eyes and giggling and shaking their heads.

Though- I am sure to love this boy to death, ha- remember death and remembering boys like that and your dumb love that is so cute it hurts to look at when you are not, I see the looks on the other girl's faces, I remember that too.

So, in other words back on earth if I were to back when I was a pre-teen and teenage girl if I would frap more, and I would have thought about death less- hum?

After a while, Stan remembered, that Naddalin had paid for hot chocolate, but poured it all over Naddalin's pillow when the- train moved brusquely from Lackawanna

ruing the path of the Susquehanna hitting all the ghost towns, on a rail line that just should not be there; like a ghost town trail, a haunt of the past, and like a- whistle echoing in a squall of wind.

Making quick stops along the way, one by one, wizards, fallen angels, and witches in dressing gowns and slippers go downhill to meet this stopped steam train on its way- down to the other world- of all things magic, leaving the stations. they all looked incredibly pleased to go, down under- some for the first time- after their death. Finally, Naddalin was, and they were not the only passenger on.

And at once, Neville, and said Stan, clapping their hands- saying, new souls, and whereabouts in Pennsylvania- are you from as they announced their name over the intercoms?

-And-

And- Hellhole Alley, said Naddalin, going up to her old stomping grounds.

‘How would you know?’ Emmah said suspiciously.

And the right to said Stan- looking at Haven and hold on tightly- is what she said.

-Then-

BOOM!!!

The- moment it opened, then set off short pinching screams within all the cars - where are we, they- did not know, only- I. The- would lie low for what felt like a couple of hours, they were thundering along Cross Road- light flashing in a blur. Naddalin sat up and observed buildings and benches enfolding themselves out of the Knight train's way. The- sky was getting a little lighter.

The train slammed on the- brakes and the- Knight train skidded to a halt in front of a small and shabby-looking pub called the Susquehanna- house, next to The- Freeman hotel, and the A- J's feed mill, behind which lay the- magical entrance to my railway- almost next to the village of Chery- Tree- home of The Cozy Corner Café.

Thanks, Naddalin said to Ern.

(Thought the porthole sparks flew- and everything went dark and another world- glowing in shades of green shadowy dark trees that are black seem to be lunging at us as the flickers of the lanterns on the outside of the coach's lit them slightly.)

They- jumped down the- steps, and the- leaped- Stan lowered the trunk down with baby Raven's cage onto the- tarmac or gravel. And well, said Naddalin. And Bye then- along with Dariez yet, again!

-And-

Nonetheless, Stan was not paying attention, or maybe- that is just part of the act with him too- yet I do think he is okay- I do. Still standing in her- the doorway to the- train she- was goggling at the- shadowy entrance to the- dripping stone arched passageway up to the castle.

Before Naddalin could turn, the- bend there was a hand on her shoulder. Besides there you are, Naddalin, said a voice, it was Maiara Chenoa. It was a sweet reunion, with hugs and kisses too...!

At the- same time, Stan shouted, Joannah!

Ern, come here...!

Come here...!

They were reacquainted in what seemed like- forever to them.

-And-

Naddalin looked up at- in her hand was her old notebook, and she saw her old handwriting, within a random page, a note that did not make into her published book- that she never saw- until after her days of days, it said.

“Even in someone else’s body, with my mind, I may like to perceive things differently as if I was them; then in my mind, with thoughts shard.”

It was rolled out over the facet it made her sound crazy! She ponders the why and said even my words are still being twisted, over some putting the thoughts to mine, about my thoughts.

The- owner of the- hands-on her shoulder and felt a warm cascade into her body- she- had walked right into her old friend that she had not seen for years, after she moved away.

Stan then leaped onto the- gravel beside them.

And What did- jah call Neville, Martita?

No this her- this girl standing her is- Maiara.

‘Oh!’ He spoke. ‘Sorry for mispronouncing your name-’

She said it happens more than you would think.

WELL Then- it was said- eagerly.

A small little girl in a long, pinstriped Housecoat and PJ’s, looked cold and exhausted- yet aglow within her body and a new spark in her eyes seeing an old friend.

Also, Neville- questioned the friendship of the two of them.

Then she- repeated, frowning, saying- ‘I KNEW IT- I KNEW IT ALL ALONG, Naddalin- IS _____.’

(GASP!)

-And-

Besides, I knew it- ALL ALONG!

Besides Stan shouted elatedly.

‘Ern! Ern!’ Guess- WHO SHE IS-?

I can see the mark!

-And-

I can see the blemish too!

Partition: 6

‘Yes,’ she said crossly, saying think it does not say it my life is on the line and well end up at the mercy of her, I am glad the- knight train picked Naddalin up- Maiara said, but she- and I need to head inside and have a private girl chat, just she and I to remember all things of days gone by.

She amplified her the- pressure on Naddalin’s shoulder saying come one we have a lot to do just you and me, and Naddalin found herself being steered inside yet, overjoy- d at the same time.

A slouching figure bearing a lantern appeared through the- door behind them- now sitting at the public- house- for refreshments. A hermit, toothless, saying beware of HER- she is back, and running- her mind within the body of a killer- and that killer I just become- YOU!

And you have her, Martita- UNDER YOUR THUMB! The creature said- SAID, with no face- in a creepy- creepy whisper.

She said yes, I know who she is, and like old times nothing has changed with her, I will kill her- you can put that in your report back... And will you be wanting anything more if not-

NOW GET THE HELL OUT OF MY FACE! She could odor of must coming from his breath, and the chill of death within the voice.

‘YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED-’ it said as if faded away within the gust of chill wind. Now back to you and me, it is good to see you, it has been So-o long! Would you girls like something a server asked, ‘Um- perhaps a pot of tea, for she and me,’ she still had not let go of Naddalin- using riddle’s- over that fact her worlds got in the way, back in the day.

‘You have not changed at all on the inside, have you?’

‘Sh-h.’ She put her finger up to her lip.

See you forgetting that I can foresee the future and tell the past and change the present- fortune-telling. I am here to tell you that you are in grave danger, and I am here for you always, like before... you may have passed down the globe, yet it has not moved on the hex is with you, party her in a sense yet your still the one they want to rip apart- not her- even if, she has the prophecy and has become the old you, they have found you out, and she after your very soul!

(Back to the group)

There was a loud scraping and puffing from behind them, as they got off the train, and Stan and ern appeared- slowly out of it as it was encircling them, carrying Naddalin’s trunk and Baby Raven’s cage- after all, it was the manly thing to do, and looking around excitedly, and it was turning Dariez on, she was wanting to be all clingy.

And how come you did not think she would tell us who she was, eh, Neville-
what do you think?

I think thereafter her or just she!

‘Who’s she?’

‘The mother...!’ said Stan, beaming at Naddalin who was holding hands with her girlfriend of the past, while Evelyn’s a schoolgirl’s flying horse peered interestedly over Stan’s shoulder, snorting and nah- ing.

Besides a private parlor, please, for us girls- Naddalin said pointedly. It would be nice to have one of the larger rooms tonight to tête- à- tête about boys- girls, all things that contain to love- and a pillow fight.

And ‘Bye- boys’ the girls said as some of them skipped on the backs of their hills to their new room for the night, waving too.

‘We have all had the pleasure of meeting her... Unfortunately!’

‘She has all given us SHIT!’ IT WAS SAID- AROUND THE ROME IN SO MANY WAYS- REFERRING TO THE FACT.

I met her! And they went to the group talking about the girl that should not be named, and her mother. You could see this world's sun drop, and the flying creatures' bed down for the night, like the flying horses, and birds only know this magical world too.

Besides, I must have been the- last to know that she- killed all the people! Said Maiara. You- being one of the Lily... so it as true, it was she did it, and you were just at the wrong place at the wrong time...

Naddalin- I can say- and yes, I would say that- would be what is implied.

(In the girl's washroom)

And then showing a haunt, a ghost of Nevaeh appeared- It was me what rescued you, Lily, over- Alyssa's, and AVA- and those sisters, and all the girls did what they did you, and I spent so much time at your house after you were killed!

Little did they know that this was the sole of the body of the girl they knew too well, and her mind was in the body of Naddalin next to them. And her heart had stopped beating a long time ago, yet it never grows cold to her girlfriends in the room.

They Just got to her before I, and her father's death... not long after, and my life- was going on- and on forever, and I still feel as if I could have done more, she was nothing but- remains, poor little thing, I never forgot, with a great slash across Lily's temple, she remembered- all the times they played to gather in a flashback of their youth, it was moving like a film strip- in sepia, ripping way, you could see the blush- of small N a marking they made on her saying- someday this well marking on you will bring us to a girl- that you once knew, that we will kill- in front of you, and them too, and you'll bring us to her- Lilly, she washed for bed- and said- I should let you know your name starts with an N, and So-o did yours- she takes her by both hands saying- Neveah- be careful.

(Odd like the letter missing on my old typewriter- oop- ie's, and she covered her mouth- at that moment she flew into her arms.)

Lily- Never occurred to me what she- was doing there, yet I prayed for her death dearly. And I want to say thank you, and I am sorry for you having live with my sins- even if I did not have any, as a teen girl, under the thumbs of the girls that were every part of me over being begrudging of me being more of them, I was not and could never- ever, but to them, I must have been a threat?

I knew Lily was my Secret- Keeper, for years, I always trusted her, yet- yet I was wondering if this were a pot or if she were her- never did I think in my life did I think that someone could take over your mind and thoughts- yet it seems like my mind can be raped at any moment be them, I knew she wanted to me, and to understand my new being- yet I was reluctant.

Yet, I knew that she knew- and would understand; she always did... thought she had just heard the- news- about all the attack and come to see what she- could do for me, or to see if I was- taken over by them again.

Even if, it looked like- I may have killed you just remember- there the one that had control of my- mind, body, and soul. They may have my soul and damn it to hell now, and they had their fun with my body, yet no one will take my mind off me, even if I must split into the other bodies.

White and shaking she was, and yen know what I did? I COMFORTED her- MURDERING- they all think they lost their minds, yet it was her getting her revenge

within their minds, going back was worth it to see them dye- said sweet little Lily, with her hair ribs hand on either side of her sweet little childlike face.

You know what... good for you- because, I would have killed them too! 'I am salivating just think about it!'

And Lily roared saying- 'I am not a little wimpy pussy of a girl anymore for them to diddle- now it's my time to diddle them.'

I never knew you to talk like that... I spoke. My mouth dropped... such language out of her mouth- remember her as So-o sweet and oh so innocent and a church mouse.

'Please! 'She said- 'innocent?'

That is not a sad thing to be remembered for Lily- like at Karly- which is better? They were going through her chapters and photos of her former life, later that night, saying well this could be your legacy.

She said at least I would have had one...

Then Professor McDermott was walking past the girl's room- arched wood door, that is medieval- also in the look, the room softly touched lit. she said- 'girls- keep your voice's down!'

-And-

And how was I to know she- was not upset about Lily and Adriane's there still girl-girl and girlfriends, fear is why they are not- you would understand. I must kiss her always and do as she take- still, yet I learn to love her. Adriane has changed... she is sweet now- to all, and the cutest evil angel, you ever did see- and she winked at me. Her look and attitude have completely changed, you would not even know her- she is so sympathetic, nice, and gentle; she has also disowned her family- for me, and that was the deal, or I would not have agreed.

‘I can forgive... even in the mysterious world, and I get to say, that I have done that for her.’

‘I cannot-’ Naddalin said back.

Alyssa with you?

Not yet- she is happy to be with my ghost- she has not found me yet- you know who is trying!

Naddalin- the funniest thing- is that I see them here every day in class too and she has known idea who I am... And I am trusting you to keep it that way- you understand.

Lily- It was You- Know- Who she- cared about, getting at you, not all the girls- they just followed what she said to do!

Naddalin- The mother and that- girl... well never change- what do they want from us? They want you to bow to them and worship their every word and want and desire.

(The tower card that will never fall...) said Naddalin.

Partition: 7

...And then Lily- says, 'Give Naddalin to me, she is saying it with inflamed eyes all controlled- by another's dark mind, I'm your garden of you, after all, it was all creepy and her head tilted to the one side, I'll look after her- she said back in a possessed whisper overpowering the possessed with her power of worlds-' Ha, it said- you are too incompetent!

Nonetheless, I had had my orders from Duriez's mom and dad, about her wanting her own life. That told me, and my type was no longer welcome, with their family, to help in her life in any way I was to blame for them losing their little girl- they said, yet she must of not taking to the hex, that I want to pass down- that I try to selfishly give to her solely, it is all back with me- why? I questioned, I could feel it, that now meaning that they could track me down- like radar, and she ratted me out too... or did Lily? Or has my luck run out? And even Duriez was acting odd- as if she were- NOT- herself.

I knew they got to her and took over her body and mind- and her soul was banished over me anyway, so in the way, it was all my fault.

I know who- I have my money on- do you? And I told know no one about me, yet they both know- they are all getting to know the real me- and those scars met the most, Duerre said I was to go to her aunt and uncle's, to get her and my things, she was leaving forever- and not to come back.

That is when back ran into our room- when I was thrown up into the air ready to be ripped to pieces, that is when he lipped protecting me- coming out of hiding, as one of the professors and pulling all the entities out of my body and take them in himself, into his body.

Black argued- with me saying 'I'm one of the good ones- I am here for you, they did the same to me, before you- there was my girl- they were after, she was a lot like you.'

Her name was- Naddalin, and you become her! I am your biological father, and even if you became her, I would protect you from them! Now and always...!

She is always with me you know that... I am saying to him- with a true running down my face.

Black- but in the- end, the- same way you did do ever gave in. I even changed my name and look yet they still got me to kill for them- and be their simple fool- and pulled the strings if you well!

'They made me give you to them that night up or I would be punished- and oh was I, when you were just in your playpen- all those years back- Naddalin, I am living- too like you be only existing. I even had to sleep with the mother- or I would have been

killed, chopped up into little bits- and marched nude about the streets- stoned and locked in a dungeon chained to a wall with no lights and no sounds other than the bats dropping shit on me and the cold ground around me, it was open to the elements- rain, sleet, hell, and high water too- winters to distorting sizzling summer days- also stripped of my pried- they tried to break me at the prison!’

So, I backed off- and let them do this to you- and for that, I am remorseful for- yet there was nothing I could do.

I will not need to live on anymore,’ he- says if means that you do. I may not be your dad, yet I feel as if I am, I know who you are!

NEVAEH!

I know...

Partition: 8

I should have known-

There was something devious going on then. She- loved her dad more than anything, what was she- given- was a chance to live on and she did not take it, so I took her body, she did it for me to live undercover? Her dad never really- knew until now- that I was all to blame and felt if I was, and I feel shame yet once more for being alive and causing pain to others, yet as I said- they will not let me die- even if I have tried over and over to do So-o. They want me to feel pain, aching, and discomfort- always- in everything, that was the plain alalonga remember?

Why wouldn't she- need him anymore so that all I ever wanted was my dad back- and you know who was at the bottom of us all losing out on love and loved ones alike?

What the freak here is a problem? I thought... The fact was, I was too easy to trace.

Duriez knew she had been the Secret- Keeper, with her crystal, and about me- I wonder if she squealed and gave them the ball of my life and lives after. And just like that, a small voice in my head said, 'NO!' this is not my fault- blame the one you always trusted! She has gone bad for them, she was charmed- into this you know.

I's did not know what to think- still in shock of all the overwhelming information coming into my mind- everything like always- seeming as if, all at one time.

'I would bust the crystal ball yet all the stories of the past and your old life would vanish in the shards of glass.' She said holding the ball in her little and with it aglow- seeing the old me, that could be life go to shards of the floor at any moment, yet I was looking through her eyes- also with tears saying it is time to let the life of the past go- I was inside of her my eyes were now her eyes looking in and reflected both me and her in the stare of the glass- I could see the colors of visions- looking in- and then it hit the floor, and part of me died over them yet again.

I never give much to see life come to end, not my own through new- younger eyes other than my own- reflecting at me- yet at that moment, my life end closing chapter, I was lost between souls and bodies, of other girls- that saved me from ending- to

them when it was my choice all along... right? Now the only thing documented about me is in the text, and to me is what is retold about me in its light, it is different from seeing everything for it was within the glass ball- for day one and up like a movie flashback. All my memories- I put in there for safekeeping- out of my head so they could not corrupt them over being mean- shattered to the wind in one night never to get back- ever.

Yet that is what they wanted just maybe, now they will leave me alone...! I thought this uncertainly, shyly, and indefinitely.

‘Oh well, what is the use of thinking at all at this point, just for my thoughts to be shattered- too- by them, the real me was gone.

Black knew this was a blow to me- and he said- ‘I would not plan on it...’

‘...It came along and knocked my wind out- God's honest- truth!’

~*~

Subconsciously, it takes at least 6- 8 months for the brain to process complete forgiveness for someone who hurt you emotionally. Yet that has been my life... so you would think by now I would be used to it.

He- was going to have to run for it that night- and he did and lied to me, he knew it was a matter of hours before the- Bureau was going to be after him not her- she always gets away with everything- she always did and always well.

But what if I had given- you Naddalin up to her then... eh?

Do you think you should have it?

No, and she avoided the dialog, ‘everyone thought that you were lost and drowned sea- wet until they found out otherwise.’

‘The best friend’s girlfriend was you if you were under the spell! That is why I was okay with this alone.’ Nonetheless, when one of us goes over to the- Dark Side, there is nothing and no one that matters to them anymore...

-And-

A long silence followed the story of how he escaped- not only the jail by having them in his mind.

About the time asked about the latter, Madam Rosette walked in asking if I was okay, she said with some satisfaction, seeing Black- that she knew for years, I see you have made it back to us, and she- said I see that you did not manage to disappear- completely, did you- even if you should have and know how too-?

The- Bureau of Magic caught up with you- and they have you to have they not- NADDALIN? She said in a demeaning way.

‘You can face your problems if you’re not facing them,’ she said rapidly.

‘Why would I want to I have don’t that all my life’s and yes, I said lives’.’

-And-

That is when she said you need to come with me Black- I know that you are not the blame- not the bad guy yet that is not how they feel... and even I, have to say that you are the one they saw doing the act of crimes.

(Some time has passed)

Black is locked in the castle dungeon- he could overhear them talking, and sadly, if only we had, and said Harlan bitterly, the evidence saying you are not to blame for it all.

And it was not we who found her- it was him that led us to you- missie and you think you are so smart and cute- they said this as they were marching to the washroom, to have their way with her- like in the past before- making her their sexual bitch before asking her to kill for them- so they could live on in new bodies. Or to just kill me and end it all here.

It was little Kellie- another of her' friends that walked in and saw it all go down. Annoyed by grief, no doubt, and knowing that Black had been Neveah Secret-Keeper all these years, Mazel Amsel went after Black herself, along with her girls, torture him in mid-evil ways- right down to castrating the man, until he gave in to saying, like- were Naddalin was and all. It was either do it or die a final death, of hell in their wrath.

-And-

Kellie... that little girl who was always tagging around after I was one of their brainwashed spies at the school? Said Madam Rosette- one of the eldest women- to teach if not the older at 1,606 years old, to me later that evening, at the lunch table.

‘She has seen this before, yet never quite like this, she said they she was always, like that even when she was a little girl want everyone’s attention, or you have to pay for not giving it to her, she was always a sneaky odd child, she said, even then... very dark in her ways- and eyes that would like and pass through you in a jolting wave- of then run a terror, I would know she made me feel, that way even in my classroom, pass me or I will kill you, and pass your soul to waste- I never figure out how she becomes so powerful maybe you can?’ She said in a whisper- of fear.

‘She- worshipped Black, yet he would never give her the time of day, he would not give himself up to her in a way, and that drove her farther into madness, some say- I too. Odd that your only choices here in bodies were her daughter, that you have become, and this was chosen for you out of resentment in fate- twisted by them, I am sure to say to you. Ava was your mother, do you see?’

That is why she is inside you and you can hear, and she knows your thoughts, just like her with black you were the élite of her soulmate and you refused, so she will take. Yet some say you belong to the mother, that also is a mystery shrouded within secrecies- covered up.

At once said Professor McDermott, that all I know about this, yet you may want this it is her child hold a crystal ball, like yours she to your life memories now you take hers, still them and then smash this if you can?

‘If I can?’

‘Yes...’

Good luck I have been trying for years now, the shard shatter and then moments later come back together, looking her power, within it of how she got where she is, you destroy this you have broken into a part of her soul that she will never get back and that good maker her weaker- and you are more powerful.

‘How do I destroy it?’ She squalled having her old high-pitched childlike voices come through her.

‘This for you to search your soul and hers- and others that were finds and foes to like to find out-the key lies within you.’ she said vaguely.

‘She was never quite about her union, talent-wise, she wanted you me us- them to all to know- her claim to fame and cheating her way to- using whatever or whomever it took to get there. It is all in the ball, a lot of NASTIES- NASTY SEX! Things I have never heard of... yet that how a woman gains power- NO? IT ALL LAY WITHIN HER- private parts. I SHOULD know to be a Catholic school girl and having a priest, use me, for years has his- lover, yet I became a Nun, I even had a baby girl to the man that was 7 mounts in- she was cut out of me- he committed manslaughter- burn her in the firebox to heat the larger school- that was only for girls like me- and the ashes scattered and then buried within the old school grounds in the basement- I was not alone in this there lots of girls baby’s down there in the lowest level of that private rich school in Cresson, Pennsylvania, known for their mercy...’

‘...Yet the habit covered that too, like the churches compassion- towards us girls having been prayed on by the holy- and made to fear. That is why I am here... that

is why, and I not saying- that I am wrong that is why- 1,606 years passed- I not caving, I am right- and I have my rights- as a woman.'

'I was often hasty sharp with her, in my class for she was lazy. You can imagine how I am- now- I was stricter then- how I regret that now... I should have just let her have her way, and none of this would have happened? The blame for all this is on me?'

-And-

She- sounded as though she would- had a sudden head cold, and lost all strength within her old decrepit body- that was dropping with age- gray hair all stingy- yes faded without much color, yet that was my punishment to age, and not stop, till I admitted- I was wrong- for being used as a pile of rubbish can- in every way a girl could be used as one. And there, now, Minerva, she was hysterical crying about the events she just witnessed and said Harlan kindly to take her to the hall for ice cream- as the good little girls do, and Madam Rosette died in her shoe's- her last death, she was the key to the next step.

Eyewitnesses - of course, yet not to their worlds of cover everything up or else, we rubbed their memories out later- we were told this, so there would be no panic. Everything that we saw with- Black, and they know who I am- it bad enough have them against me I do not need this entire world too- by them making an army- with her being the all-mighty power over all- yet I feel that will happen at some point- don't you?

They say, Minerva- was sobbing,' Lily and Alyssa, over know more about Tirus- than any of the others! That she was seeing him on and off, after the escape, romantically. How could you? They said to her, she was so weak she could not speak for the tears.' And then she- went for the crystal ball- for them- not us, yet it was a lost journey on her part.

Well, of course, Black was quicker, he had all of them deceived into thinking it was someone other than himself, he tried places with her, yet they somehow did not see that just happen.

Blowing Alissa's memories of her and Chiaz smithereens be she dropped the ball... her past life... No-? Yes! ...Gone in a blink of an eye, that is what Minerva did for me by bringing this ball, the wrong one, yet the right one for me- little did she know I ready know the plan. IT WAS PAYBACK!!! And this all reviled the spell she had him under, it is not going to get him back to me- yet I feel justice has been made. She can burn in hell now- where she should be- that one less I must fight!

Then- Professor McDermott blew her nose, in her slave and said thickly, and said 'Stupid girl... foolish girl... you are- always hopeless at clashing... a fantasy of freedom and choice- that you will never have. I should have left it to the- Bureau, over this all I am sick of cover your ass!'

'You're blaming me?' She said with an airy breath within a gasp.

And I tell yen's, if I'd got to Black before little Emmah did, I wouldn't've messed around with wands or crystal ball with children she said, after all, you cannot

trust them, if your you and all - no you're going to be ripped her limb- from- limb, over having these children to your business, and that all this is personal, and that how you're taking it, and you are putting our children at risk, I will tell you this now as she was slamming her middle finger hard into her chest, '...you have any of our children in any danger- I will kill you myself, by ripped you limb- from- limb, you understand!' and she was screaming two inches from her face at this point.

In the background looking out the castle's large ornate arched windows, you could see children at play innocently- who are fallen angels are flying in the dusking sky.

Professor McDermott- 'Playing tag or hid and seek and juvenile games like that... as children do, even here they are still children. There here over the fact they wanted freedom, and out of an overbearing life, you- yes, you there- girl, do not take that away from them over personal- Baby- field- BABY SHIT!'

'When is this war going to be over with you?' She asked. And you do not know what you are talking about, Emmah, Dariez- and you too with the eyes and the face... she said sharply- your just kids; they were backtalking, her word and authority.

-And-

Nobody but trained Success Sorcerers from the- Magical Law Enforcement Squad would have stood a chance against Black once he- was waylaid, so what makes you think you would, or that they could stop her- even if... Mazel Amsel and her family of girls, are more powerful then all of us combined, she can and will not be stopped ever- and you are the blame- YOU. What you did was shitty- and self-centered.

Naddalin- ‘YET IT’S A-OKAY FOR THEM TO WHATEVER THEY WANT TO ME WITH NO CONCUBINES, AND THAT’S FINE, I DARE NOT SAID UP FOR MY RIGHTS- NO- FUCK NO, THAT WOULD BE WRONG! And her fist is clenching her caller, you will kill me... ha- ha?

‘I was junior in the- Division of Magical Upheavals at the- time, and I was one of the- first on the- scene after Black murdered all those people, I was there I know that he is the one that did this, I saw it with my own eyes.’

‘You don’t know half of what you think you do!’ Said Naddalin.

Professor McDermott- ‘Oh there she goes again playing the victim.’ She said when she was finally let go of, she had enough strength after her knees shaking- out of tear to speak. I, I will never forget it. I still dream about it sometimes.’

‘Your dream is nothing like my nightmares! I can assure you of that.’ Said Naddalin, as Nevaeh, her real personality was coming through her more than ever before, within her transformation. He blasted a hollow in the middle of the- street, so deep it had cracked the- sewer below.

‘Yes, that maybe So-o yet was it all him- or all in his mind.’

‘I knew it you are crazy!’

‘Yes- we know’ said one of the girls landing on her feet her back feathered wings retracting back into her back drawing quickly and almost unnaturally- ‘Bodies everywhere- blow to pieces nothing left but nude kids body parts laying on one another-

down in the hole, when they picked thought all the remnants- there was nothing to bury- that was identifiable other than the sex, so they just covered everything over and said we don't care and made the road on top of the mass grave, there is not even a headstone, marking the day in history.'

All the nonmagical people were screaming. 'WE KNOW'- they screamed- and we are more intelligent than just unintellectual kids.

And Black standing there laughing nude- completely mad- foaming at the mouth even, as the day he was born- shackled in his holding cell, with what was left of the shards of the ball within his feet that are bleeding blood that is only of this world... leaking blood, covering bloodstained roots of neighboring lingering, haunting, and melancholy tree on the outside working their way in, of the ground underneath- start grabbing around his body weaving vines, and veins- like charming bowling constrictors- those too were linking his body snakes- and the worms for the ground were eating into his mind, everything was sucking the life out of him feeding the land, and the castle ground was breaking it all up- life was given back.

And the oddest thing in the moment of darkness there was a small ray of light showing down on him on his face, and he was in a world all his own in paces. Even if it was also sucking the life out of him- he had done his afterlife missions.

A few- just a few fragments of the glass were sucked up within him- overpowering his awareness, seeing all the memories, of one the girl's life that terrorized his daughter, he teared up, thinking how sad they are and pathetic.

All voices stopped abruptly- as he linked with all her minds and conscientiousness- they saw what he saw about Alissa Amsel the blonde hair, blue-eyed girl, everything about her life even the things that a girl would never show to others, was reviled- and how she was a bully and terrorist- in the sweet-looking covering the body of yearning, to all that were under her spell. He screamed and inside coming out of his mouth with this black steam like gushing vapor with creepy crawlers, bugs, and insects- come out along with the demons of the girl in a wispy diaphanous hooded ghost, fighting the death- scream ear pricing, and the world shook- yet in death she took a soul down with her, it was his.

(Later on, that day talking with Emmah and the girls at the table.)

‘It is just like you running a moment thinking about the past and dwelling on it, it is what you want to think that you have created in your mind, about things and not knowing the truths- just what is indirect, it is what you want to believe and not know- and that is stopping you from what could have been wonderful. And that is why a lot of my old-time, interests did not work with me they did not see me- Just like making love to him after he found out the truth about me was to him like the perfect kiss, he could have... and the right fight to him, and me you understand?’

Not at all they were shaking their heads at her as if she had lost what was left of her mind. ‘Well, there at least you have her thoughts, girls,’ Dariez said in a slurred voice, after being well drunk off magical potions- to get the demons out. And said was Naddalin forgiveness to her about the events of the day, she understood that her mind was not her own at the time.

That night Black dead body was taken away by twenty members of the-
Magical Law Administration in a carriage along with fifty others in a funeral procession
to the graveyard of those that past for a final time- to pass to the leaves of hell below- to
be licked by the flams of fire and heat.

‘He acutely gets the first-class serve,’ some the townsfolks said under their
breath, grudgingly and disgracing him to the tune of voices, that they were using to
dishonor him. ‘It’s a way to be remembered.’ Said one elderly gentleman, nevertheless, I-
Naddalin, think was a comfort to the poor older elders- and the parents of the children
that have lost their lives to Black’s within the town, that has never- ever been the same
since the massacre- yet little do they know the truth. The girls look on to see him being
pulled into the sunset, feeling the same as she in their thoughts, saying goodbye for the
last time, in that brief time he had become part of them that would last within them for
years to come.

-And-

Madam Rosette lets out a long sigh.

And is it true she was mad, Minerva, and was a snitch- and was also taken too
with him today within the procession, for the tallest tower of the castle? It is comical to
me nobody knew here either, only for what she was known for doing, it made me think
back and wonder if this was right or wrong to do to a child. She was possessed- by them-
and you know who- her. And another death at the behest of her doing and her girls- yet
nothing is said about it other than that girls were to blame for it all.

-Then-

And, I wish I could say that she- was, said Harlan hoarsely. And I certainly believe she master's defeat with her crazy her for a while, and well cool off, despite the fact and then well start it all back up again- like always said Naddalin with the hate and all- that is what she does, starts crap and then get scared goes into hiding and then lets dye down for a while- for us to feel safe and then starts it back up again; that is the joy of it for her- you know who... she and her girls.

'She is the- murder then?'

Naddalin- 'Yes and know you would have to prove that- and good luck.'

And all those nonmagical people were the- accomplishment of a confronted and desperate man revenge- cruel... pointless. Yet, I met Black on my last scrutiny of Dizeryland, and he said it was over you- and Nevaeh, and some who you were both linked in he is going nuts on them- or something like that.

And You know, ladies, if you are dining with the- principal, we would better head back up to the- castle.

(Dinner)

Nothing but the low light of lanterns- glowing young faces, you know, most of the kids do not you, there sit muttering to themselves in the- dark about all this; there is no sense in them... being here in the first place, I mean they are just kids what could they have done, nothing compared to him for an instant. Yet there here in this underworld

wasteland that is so dark and mysterious, yet magical and wonderfully beautiful at the same time, it is them like always that ruin everything. This was said over conversations with the group of girls.

‘Like- I was shocked at how normal Black seemed when he hugged me it was for real, you know...’ Said Naddalin. ‘He was with her it felt like... said the one, that was coming around to understanding.’ It was unnerving, he- spoke quite sensibly to me.

You would have thought he- was merely tired- by his look know he was exhausted over them playing with his mind and heart. It was asked if I had finished with my newspaper- so they could see the stories- I thought, cool as you please, Emmah said, she- missed doing the- mind-bender in the back, she had enough of the headlines- she dove into them frantically, doing one right after another. Yes, I was almost astounded at how negligible effect the- dementors and all and everything were having on her- and the voices that played in her head too were not getting her down.

She- was one of the- most heavily safeguarded in the- place, by others how loved with her leaves of powers and smarts within the type of angel she is, you know, she did not need them playing with her mind she had the power to stop them- she just needs to believe that she could, like me also, that part of their plan to wearing you down, so you do not have the strength to fight back. Dementors outside the door day and night- sucking the thoughts right out of your head- for them- for them- for them- for them- for them to use agents you- me and her over there too.

‘What is their problem?’

‘I- we- you and me- we don’t know?’

-And-

‘But what do you think he’s broken out to do?’ And said Madam, she was sitting down the way from the girls.

‘What Is a Paranormal Spirit Attachment?’ I have read about this in the library's restricted section of dark magic, Said Karly.

‘It was to an ad in him killing one part of her soul, I think- that she spit lay within the objects like the crystal ball, it helps kill her seeing her precious children fail, in not getting or keep what they want- or wanted, In these objects, she has made them, and herself the most powerful one of us could ever be- by stilling and taking- and not caring if she is slaughtering someone’s babies doing it, this is what she has made for herself to last for eternity- lasting power within objects, along with keeping her kids locked in theirs as well, that’s was what it was all about- ‘she was dumb and I knew more.’ Said Naddalin, back all jittery.

Professor Rosette... ‘Karly you should not be looking into those books in there... end up with two heads or something, just by reading something that you and I both would not understand and know how to fix.’

‘Well anyways I have this book saying- what she did, how she did it, and why she did, it’s her story- take it.’

Naddalin opened the book reluctantly, and before her eyes, the pages all went blank. Oddly it only was left for your eyes to see, I wonder why?

Karly- I have a thought... and that is all she said skipping off down the hall, with the large tattered brown leather-bound book that looked way to odd and big for her small body, that was under her arm, the book was even starting to pull on her long blue hair by the pages grabbing at her, being nasty to her, she said must keep this thing locked up. (There is a big lock that needs a skeleton key on around it with a ribbon holding the evil inside.) Odd she said- to Naddalin, and I had the key- as a necklace for years... and did not know why till now... 'they want you to know- she said back, to - PROVE IT!'

Just like us and how we the dead jump into the living for life, overseeing what we missed.

'And Good gracious,' Martita, said, 'I remember that happing to me when I was a child and now, I doing to it to children, it scares me, I don't want to think that Lilly is trying to join You- Know- Who is she-?'

'She did, the one I's could always trust has gone bad.' The girls all shook their heads uneasily.

-And-

'Also, I feel like you in daresay that is there- ultimate plan,' said instructor Harlan ambiguously. And but we hope to catch them in the act of her controlling her long before that, to see if it here feeling this way to me or them making her feel that way. I must say, You- Know- Who- her and her girls alone and friendless is one thing... at this

point, nobody likes them yet there still afraid of them. So-o giving her back to them as her most devoted servant, in the cards, as she lays them all out for them to see in her reading- the cards jump- leap and dance, out of her hand in moments of magical performances. At this point, I have my own set made to my liking and artwork approved. THE DEVIL card says it all to me.

And I shudder to think how quickly she will rise again...

-Then-

There was a small chunk of glass on the heavy handcrafted wood table in front of me and them, and well us- it started glowing, shaking, and moving about as if possessed. Look, girls, it is Alissa Amsel the badass bully of the school that took Neveah lovers away- look now girls she is all-powerful. Overcome it was- it was- it was the last fragment of Alissa Amsel's life and excrescences. Someone had set down their glass down to see this shard fight for it the last snuffle of life, and Emmah watched it like a bad puppy, with her, rolled up newspaper, (saying bad- bad,) which then led into Naddalin-smashing it down to dust with her flat's schoolchild shoe from her left foot. And the maliciously evil girl was dead never- ever to be again in any lives!

One by one, the- pairs of feet in front of Naddalin took the- weight of their owners once more, all minds were back to where they should be by their magical contacts- as the Bureau of magic knows them to be; everything was back in order, that is when all the teacher and professors got up and walked down the lengths of tables after the fest- of commencement ceremonies took places after the death marches.

They all march down the middle all of them in their elegant robes swung into sight, for all the students still sitting there in their uniforms, an order has been reclaimed; to the school and castle and Madam Rosette's glittering shekels disappeared behind the bar... were she orders a drink and said- 'that is the last time we shall be dealing with them for a while.'

Yet Naddalin sat in the background next to the fireplace sitting on the large rock hearth- looking around all suspicious, think it was too early to celebrate. The girls start to get up from their tables, looking at them you can see three with wings opened again for a fight, there was another flurry of snow outside, making the perfect backdrop for them to start to fly in this world.

Just like that the heavy wood doors flew open, with a gush and rush of air blowing the hair back on most of the girls, yet that did not stop the children from rushing for the door in flight as they all took off for the outside- it was the time of altering secession, as well- flares were covering the graveyard, the castle grounds, and the homes within the many villages; of this land that was so otherworldly, that it's hard to comprehend if you're not one of us that has fallen, with a large squall and swell arrived the winter storm, ending a year, it looked as if they all disappeared, as they fly off into the distances, come back to their homes- for the break.

'Just in time she said for us all to go home,' said Naddalin.

As she looked around for the last time and slowly strolled out the door, saying fitting to them, the party was over now. It is their party, isn't it? Hum- she sighed, saying

this is their time for the break too- by the time we are all back there will be another round for us, more me than any of them, yet- well that my life. She was murmuring like a crazy girl, as she walked slowly into the deepening snowdrifts, not caring that she could fly, she just wanted to remember what it was like to walk- away from her problems.

Jinger's And Emmah's faces appeared under as the train steam ever so slowly- with the beam of light glowing a soft yellow- tracks grounding as if scream in the pain of the brakes- and large red wheels- the cowcatcher looking as if it was going to nip their uncover school girl legs, cold and raw from the air, and flats style unfarmed shoe they were all wearing, the train was tumbling in a rhythm as it was pulling into the station for them to go back home, even if not a long trip in real-time, it felt like it was going to be on their time. book- bags field with overdue homework- and note hanging out about- many spells, potions, and all things dark and magical, and let us not forget flying, and a new set of cards given, to them by their best friend in their world Naddalin- that was her Holiday gift to them.

'Don't yah just hate it when they give homework over Christmas break?' Said Emmah in sitting now by moving one of the old benches to face backward, to face the other girls. 'Um- like- look at the overelaborate metalwork on these things god... only you would notice something like that- there really old and made well- aren't they, like look at this woodworking and these lights- and red velvet covered sets.' she all so said.

They were both staring at her, lost for words, at her being taken back by what was inside, and then more on what was happening out the foggy windows.

Bye, Neville! She called us, then one by one they were going home- to their stations- and their homes on Earth.

Naddalin made her way along with the- narrow channel cover into the stone that is so tight that only one person can walk through at a time- sometimes needing to sidestep, though jagged rock faces, damp and musty, a passageway called Havannah's channel within the castle she walks human skulls littering the walls- of years past, holding a lantern, and then into it leads out to parts of the villages where there is a small shop. She then kept walking onward till she found an inn where she planned to spend her time off, it was vacant- and eerie, cold and all occupations about gone for the Holidays. She then clicked her fingers, a fire burst into life in the- great fireplace within her large room- that she rented out, and she- bowed herself into her warm cozy bed, and soft sheets- and sleep for what would be two days in Earth time- she was just that played out from the voice in her head and others playing with her emotions- that being alone and quiet was almost defying- with the ringing in her ears of nothingness.

When Naddalin finally woke up from her slumber, she sits down in one of the Victorian chaises in her room, by the- fire, she began to replay all the memories of the past weeks in her mind, and already it was playing her out in new leaves of fatigue that she never felt before, and then she went to lie down more, and sleep- saying along with thinking in many ways saying the same thing of- 'I cannot do this' in foolish mumbles of incoherencies.

Naddalin did not have a noticeably clear idea of how she- had managed to get back into the tunnel in the first place, yet she did- she had this idea in her mind for some

time to come here a place where she knew that nobody knew where she was, and that was simply fine with her. A small-town hotel and first-class service, where she could just relax and reflect... it was an escape from the girl's room in the turret of the castle.

She was thinking about a cousin that she played with some when she was a child that also was forbidden, over the fact that she was in love with him, it was wrong, yet she never let go of think about what could have been if they would have been left be, even if... Is Love- love know? Blood is blood- even if- she thought- even if... this or that- it does not matter how it is in the past- is it not?

She was thinking far too much about things, things like the end... and of all ends- 'Death well squeeze your mind, creep in, and play and in far too long, and stay even if you do not want it too, death well lingers and pounder, and drain you of all wonder, it with fiddle with your brain, like taking blood from the veins- 'till it kills you.' She thought.

I said her mafia would never get me, and that is what it is, and was- and what is going to say being; I also said that she would never- ever get me, never- ever- ever never... yet she did- she did- and sad to say, like- I do not think I care anymore. All I have are my lost thoughts of questions that lead to more questions of wonder and pondering of the questions why, and that leads to more inquiries of why? She thought.

~*~

She thought more- and more- 'till her mind was at a stroke.

And into the- castle once more she went.

All she knew- was that she- return after her trip to find herself and seemed to take no time at all in caring for her on losses- her mind concern- about nothing but the past and all the days lost and that she; hardly noticed what she- was doing- did not seem to make any scene... even if the only ones looking were the otherworldly animals around her, because her head was still pounding with the- conversation she- had just heard.

She pondered- they why of it all... why had nobody ever told her? Duerre, McDermott, Mr. Railie, Cornelius Harlan... why hadn't anyone ever mentioned the- fact that Naddalin's parents had died because- their best friend had deceived them?

Jinger And Emmah watched Naddalin nervously all through dinner, not daring to talk about what they had overheard, because- Serafina was sitting close by them.

When they went upstairs to the- packed public room, it was to find Freeanna and Katy had set off half a dozen or more Fertilizer bombs in a fit of end-of-term high spirits.

Naddalin, who did not want Freeanna and Katy asking her questions about if she had reached the Claepsiara- yet of, the Skoufyceol of Wizardry or not, sneaked quietly up to the- empty student house and headed straight for the bedside dresser.

She- pushed the books aside from her life not even thinking that she had everything in black and white, and then quickly found what she- was looking for.

At once, and at that moment at that time: she had found it- the leather-bound photo album- McDermott had given her two years ago, which was full of wizard pictures

and all things magical. Like her life as both fallen dark and holy white angel- and then even further back to when she was a child with her daddy; and her human life.

She- sat down on the bed, drew the- curtains around her that were hanging from the canopy that was around her, and started turning the- pages, searching, until... she found all the memories that she had lost within her mine- like an old backup hard drive; she planned for this moment and knew it was going to happen she could foresee it a long time ago; she was horrified loss of her mind- yet relieved that she had a plan like always; she was not yet, defeated- by her and her girls.

She- stopped on a picture of her own' wedding day- and then was looking for her parents- day as well and then she recalled that they were never married, even more terrified- she became- over her loss of memories- after the crystal ball broke, thinking her mind was finally gone- and given up to them- unwillingly.

There was her daddy waving up at her- she could see the photo yet that was all that was there the movement of her thoughts like films were gone, beaming, she- untidy her black hair Naddalin had inherited standing up in all instructions- not having any more wit in her mind then they said- she had when she was just a little girl, by what they had made her become, back in elementary school- the mind of 2nd grader- she lost the thought of reading and was like starting over.

There was her mother, alight with happiness, arm in arm with dad. And there... that must be her. There is the best man... Naddalin had never given her a thought before.

If she- had not known it was the- same girl, she- would never- ever have guessed it was Black in the old photograph, that was holding her.

The face was not sunken and deceived to dust before her eyes, but handsome thoughts yet they were, full of laughter- lost in her mind like she was the day she passed the first time.

Had she- already been working for Ava when the picture had been taken? Was she, already planning the deaths of her, two people next; the closest to her- she wondered, yet it was muddy? The- dormitory door opened- and the lights went out.

Did she- realize she- was facing twelve years in Dizeryland, twelve years that would make her unrecognizable? Or had the twelve years already passed, she did not know she was lost in her mind and did not have one left- for the taking- she was broken- like the shards of glass- with her memories.

Naddalin slammed the- album shut- the tears staining the pages, reached over, and stuffed it back into the dresser, and took off her robe, and glasses and got into bed, making sure the- long curtains were hiding her from view.

Lost in her dreams- the- dementors do not affect her- she was still strong in the subconscious she sits in a cold and damp cell- time has passed yet not sure when- where and why, not even understanding how or why she is there...

Naddalin thought- and thought more, staring at her- hand- increasingly more, and more that were scared trying to remember her life, laughing face- tears streaming-

lost in insanity. She got me she screamed- and the crows fly wildly, that was right above her oven cell that was exposed to the elements- and had no heat and lights.

Jaylynn- 'I hear my mom screaming and there is nothing- I can do nor do I need to or want to. We all can hear her screams- like a haunted train whistle of the past- in a screech that is so ear piercing that it is deafening- to the loved ones that were still linked mentally with her even if they did not want to be.'

The next day- and what is going to happen to Naddalin? Said Jinger's, like smooth- Bella-like voice yet with uncertainty. She- heard Jinger leave again, and rolled over on the back, her eyes wide open.

But Naddalin lay still, pretending to be asleep- as the guard was screaming above her jail cell that he would cut her head off and no one would care if she did not shut up, the blade was gleaming in the moonlight his breath was making a stream of heated vapor ice crystals.

A hatred such that she had never known before was pouring through Naddalin mind as if the knife went into her brain between the eyes. (And it did- after all, she would not die... even if...)

Just a thought and after one at that I knew the guard worked for her... I knew.

She- could see Black laughing at her through the- darkness- a spirit, as though somebody had pasted the- moving picture of from the album over her eyes and face- and tattooed the word retard on her forehead- (And it did- after all, she was sold to them... even if... she was fallen she was noting.)

She- watched, as though somebody was playing her a piece of film, Tirus Black blasting through her mind was things that she had forgotten about for years. (A child she played with who resembled Neville) into them, moment at once just shattered into a thousand pieces- lost she could not think of who it was.

She- could overhear... (though having no inkling or clue what Black's voice might sound like) a low, excited murmur.

My Lord... It has happened she has made me their Secret- Keeper- come out of me thought there world out of my mouth and reveal themselves- she alleged then, at that time it started the harassment within her mind- that was not in her control, taunting her to have a nervous breakdown- And then came another voice, it was them...

The girls and you know who- her- she is standing over her tall and towering yet again- if only in her mind, something she thought she would never take over yet did- more powerful than ever and Naddalin- she is nothing but again a week a little child in her wrath of shamelessness- asking for her forgiveness- for being blameless laughing herself piercingly- yet not her own if was you know who's evil snicker- and the cackles of the sisters...

The- same laugh that Naddalin heard inside, yet now coming out of her- she had taken over- and dementors drew near... and did as she said- she was the most powerful, yet again.

And Naddalin, you- you look awful, lost like a child that is re- traded- that cannot read-write or even think for herself.

‘Awah- baby wants to cry?’ The girls say...

This was the comment she had to hear without consent to them, her mind, body, and soul were sold to them... or face the fury- of final death by those that would help her.

-And-

(Then just like that it was all over-and she saw a light glow, and someone saved her from the hell that she was in, a girl in white with wings.)

But who was it?

Who...?

Naddalin had not gotten to sleep until daybreak. She- had awoken to find the dormitory dressed, deserted, and gone down the- spiral staircase to a common room that was empty except for Jinger, who was eating a Peppermint candy massaging the other girls that she was back- even if not full yet, And Emmah, who had spread her homework over three tables- was more involved in that than saying hey- even if she was not trying to be self-absorbed.

And like- where is everyone? Said Naddalin.

Gone, she said! It is the first day of the- holidays, remember?

‘Of this year-?’ She stated, the date- not understanding, that 6 years have gone by- ‘like a shot of tequila and a good butt-kicking.’

And said Jinger, watching Naddalin closely. And it is near- dinner time; I was going to come and wake you up in a minute- are you feeling up to eating with us today and not being fed in bed?

-And-

Naddalin slumped into a chair next to the- fire as if her personality were still there even if she was not physically. The snow was still falling outside the- large ornate arched windows, that were stained glass- and frosted by the cold and were glowing a tint of yellow due to the warmth of the fire- that made her feel as if she were not dead inside- even if she was.

Cookies were spread- out for all in front of them- behind was the fire like underneath was a large, ginger rug matching the medieval gothic feel of the castle.

And you do not look well, you know, and Emmah said, peering anxiously into her face- you should lay down. 'And I'm fine, good all I do is sleep any more I going to get fat also-' said Naddalin.

'Naddalin,' listen, and said Emmah, exchanging a look with Jinger, and you must be upset about what we heard yesterday. But the- thing is, you must not go to do anything stupid.

-And-

And- like what? At once said Naddalin.

And- like trying to go after Black and said Jinger sharply- who was brought back to the life you know. By the healing touch- of the dark lord- seeing into his mind and life's story just like yours- that it was why- you were saved too- he is and understand lord- no? And he takes care of his children.

Naddalin could tell she had rehearsed the tête- à- tête while she- had been asleep- she knew there was talk going on about her. She- did not say anything- she did not care- or feel there was a point in doing So-o.

‘I don’t think I will ever be who I was before...’ She spoke.

‘And you won’t, will you, Naddalin? and said Emmah.’

‘Yet, you are alive no...?’

‘Like- after all they did put you through an abyss- or a hell that most if not all here have ever seen or heard of! Tortured until you were like in a petrified of decay.’ Emmah alleged.

‘And because, Black’s not worth dying for, and said Jinger, they said they needed to say you even if there was a wrath to face regardless- that we girls all love you more than eternal life, and Black was found innocent of you- also- all is good don’t you see.’

Naddalin looked at them, like someone that had a stroke- or was not able to move their body full to smile. They did not seem to understand at all why she was so

distraught. Yet, Dariez, looking over at all of them next to the fire- she felt as if she were to blame for everything, even if she had still not apologized.

And- did you know what I see- every time a dementor gets too near me- I see her face laughing insanely in my ripping thought my face as if it wants to come out of mine? In addition to that, Jinger and Emmah shook their heads, looking apprehensively.

Also, I can hear my mom screaming- she is not my mother, she was the girl mother in-which I took over her mind, body, and soul- and to have a body to linger in... yet she and I have become close as if I were her girl- in a way I am- half her still... a soul is broken in too many minds and bodies.

...And pleading with Ava, saying that she has won, do you have to keep going.

Naddalin- And if you have heard your mom screaming like that, about to be killed, you would not forget it in a hurry- I also live with those memories, I live with nothing but horrifying bad memories. Not just my own, the ones- I must share over her wanting me too; this is just payback of me being a baby about my own life- like a sick twisted joke the God's have played on me when I was a teen girl... God's lesson learned- and why I turn my back on a God and all God's. And for not understanding why someone that was always good and did the right thing- like would be tortured- as I was- in all existences. Yet, this Lord gets me, and I get him- even if I do not feel the same about everything, and I must be thankful for life given back to me for a devil- such as he.

And if you found out someone who was supposed to be a friend of yours betrayed you and sent Ava after you... you would feel dead inside too- as I do.

-And-

Besides, there is nothing you can do!

And said Emmah, looking stricken. And the- dementors will catch Black and she will go back to Dizeryland and serve her right! Said Alyssa who was still there taunting her, the only one that was not there... at Dizeryland- even if they just got off with a reprimand and are going to be out in the week.

- Then-

Portion

And you heard what Harlan said then anyway. Black is not affected by Dizeryland jail like normal people are- like us, he is wild and foolish, irrational, thoughtless at times for the ones he cares about- when it comes to his life and others- other than his own. It is not a punishment for him- it is just whatever- and more of the same- in a life that will not end, to him he is what he hates the most an idealized fake hero- to some and adversary to others.

-And-

So-o, what are you saying?

Then said Jinger, looking very tense. 'And do they still want to- kill Black or something-'

‘...And have him on final death row?’ The girls unanimously asked these questions in the same whys, yet different terms of speech.

‘...Besides and do not be silly, the only ones that need to die a final death here is them...’ Naddalin squeaked out in a shrill voice.

Then said Emmah in a bizarre voice. And Naddalin does not want to kill anyone, do you, Naddalin?

‘No! - I have no enemies here...’

In addition to that, Naddalin did not answer the if’s... about it or not- for she did not know any more the why is of life or death or not and because... even- she was done- talking to those that did not see it her way- and was too tired to give explanations.

She- did not know what she- wanted to do. All she- knew was that the- idea of doing nothing, while the mother and the girls were at freedom- in a week or two, was- more than she- could stand.

Hi- this young sweet little girl said with blond locks and big blue eyes batting- I am Mallerie, I have been assigned to you... as your aid.

‘Awah...’ she said sound like less than moved.

(Though- even here they make me out to be SPED- mm- mm- hmm.)

And Mallerie knows, and she- said abruptly- and she is your bodyguard- here to look out for you have nothing here at the school to have anxiety about- you are safe.

She was holding my hand as if I were more than gifted now...

Sweet...

yah- no...

And remember what she- said to me in Potions?

She said- that she was looking for one to make me feel new again.

I then thought- 'hum- maybe I like this child.'

'If it were me, I would hunt her down myself... I would want revenge, said the after their first class together.'

-And-

And you are going to take Mallerie's advice instead of ours? And said Jinger furiously, you are going to trust her with your life, after knowing that is fragile now, and this could be the last time you have a life to live... said Jinger and Emma even more angrily. Like we said you should be happy with what you have not trusted some girl- you just met last night- with drinks she makes in a urinal experimentally- as if sipping from a water fountain. Like- like- um- you could end up looking like a two-headed extremely angry dog, that we could name 'Fuffie,' said Emma.

'If... ...If I must live like this... I do not want to; it is worth it to me.' Naddalin said.

'Listen... to us girl, and don't be dumb...'

Therefore, I am sick of being called dumb, so I might as well live up to my image- right girls?

Do you know what Jettigrew's mother got back after she and those girls had finished with her? A girl like you- that was still their child, yet she did what you wanted to do, and she is out there in the graveyard for the last time, with the cows dumbing shit on her stone to remember is that what you want? Besides not even a spring flower pops up for her for being dumb.

Jettigrew's finger was on the brown boxes, just printed the first copies of all the girls' stories of their lives, no longer just pages being spewed out of the charming Typewriter, placed in large piles, of stacks of paper. My dad told me- that I would be getting the first copies... Look this one is called the Pretender of Secrets! First Class mail girls, open the boxes! She said, all excited.

'That was the- biggest bit of her- a life not yet said, they could find- out about me now,' said Naddalin- 'like this all was meant to be confidential.'

'Ladies... please- forgive her she is cranky and paranoid,' said the professor.

I thought you would be thrilled- she said, along with saying- after all the work was done for you in all of these- and the editing too, and have you not done this before? She said raising an eyebrow, of inquisitorial.

It said here... that magical world thinks that she- you know who- is a madwoman- the sister's mother, and it says here they think Naddalin, she is dangerous to

herself and others... now, this is proving it said Naddalin more making more controversy for me too- fix- fix- fix?

-And-

‘Hey look...’ said the one professor girls, that read... too bad that it is not in their studies... ‘gossip- nonetheless,’ she wrinkled up her nose.

And Mallerie’s dad must have told her, said Naddalin, ignoring Jinger, that I want to see what this all said. So, she played into having them published.

‘Sweet thank you- but you shouldn’t have...’ Said Naddalin. Why is my name on the covers- I did not write these?

‘In a way you did... you started this project; you can keep it going- right?’ At that moment she grabs her shoulders.

‘If... ...you say- So-o.’ She said looking up into her eyes, with the joy of doing this for her lost.

Emma- Besides, She- YOU- Naddalin- was right along- she was in Ava’s inner circle said another skipping to the end of the first book, spoiling it- all for everybody that wants to find out on their own.

‘She...?’

‘Lily...’

-And-

Besides interjected Jinger angrily, saying- ‘the point here was, so we would not jump to conclusions, also actually read, and think for ourselves- besides not start a bunch of girls- fights over this all to read in privet, besides, have our thoughts.’

A moment or two later she whispered ‘...THANKS!’ in her ear.

‘Also, like- just say her name, will you? It does not seem like they will burn you for witchcraft!’ said one of them yelling it from the back of the room.

‘They might...?’ Alleged- Naddalin.

I have a question- ‘yes child...?’ Why did you get a new name in the book- and whom were you before?

‘So-o, it's true your: NEVAEH?’

‘I would say, honey- that you need to start from the beginnings- this does not book one- I’ll give you a hint, and read between the lines of a story like mine to find out, who I am and not what they say I am...’

...?...

‘The girl just looks dumbfound and walked away muttering, I UNDERSTAND SHE’S AFRAID- even if... it likes in black and white, even then it all in how you want to read it and take it... whatever it is... I do not know... if I care to know it... or about it all.’

And - so obviously, the- Malleries knew Lily was working for Ava... or she would not want you to know to prove it!

‘Hush...’ one girl said in taunting way, or bullying- Naddalin, who was withering away by the moment.

-And-

‘Get a grip... girl... this is all in your head.’

Besides - Also Mallerie would love to see you blown into about a million pieces! I feel that you should not trust her... Said the one girl. She is just trying to blow this up for you all to make drama.

‘...Why she is not even part of the story...’ Whispers were coming from the back, saying that she should not even be here she was to goodie-goodie.

‘Do you think So-o?’ She said all fretfully.

See and all the girls in the room start to laugh. At Naddalin how question was everything- that was said in the room.

Mallerie’s just hoping you will get yourself killed before she- must play you at Claepsiara, that is if you are up to it by then, yet that is half a year away.

-Then-

And Naddalin, please, also said Emmah, her eyes now shining with tears, please be sensible, and think about what you are doing to others, and not just about yourself, and them all the time, it is driving you insane.

Black did a terrible, terrible thing, but do not put yourself in danger, anymore for him saving you, just to save himself, it is what Black wants... Oh, Naddalin, you would be playing right into her hands if you went looking for her... with a sharp mind, and revenge in your still- and silent hart.

‘Your mom and dad wouldn’t want you to get hurt, would they, Naddalin?’

‘I don’t have parents... um- in a way- I do, yet I don’t- um- you would not understand... and it would take long for me to explain, don’t worry yourself about me I will be fine.’

They would never want you to go looking for her in the first place! She spoke.

‘I didn’t since you ask...’ was her reply.

-And-

And I will never know what they would have wanted, because thanks to Lily, I have never spoken to them, said Naddalin shortly- along with Black, doing what he did, saved me kind of- and is killing me slowly also.

‘If they wanted anything...’ said- Emma, along with saying slightly after in the next breath- ‘I would not worry yourself about it all, it’s not worth it after all-, is it?’

There was a silence in which she stretched lavishly bending her nails and left hand down to the books, her middle fingernail snapped under the stain.

(Lunch)

Naddalin looks through her food on her try- pulling out a slimy worm-

‘Are you going to eat that?’

‘I want not planning to...’ She spoke.

Jinger’s pocket quivered, she said-

Jinger- ‘I found this raven outside- fall out of her nest next to the tower, I going to keep her ‘till she big enough to fly.’

The bird chirps...

Naddalin- ‘I see it’s always good to help the defenseless.’

And Look, said Jinger, obviously casting around for a change of subject, and it is the- holidays! It is Christmas!

Let us - let us go up to our rooms now- and be with our roommates. Last visited for what well feels like ages- girls say your goodbyes!

-And-

‘Like this may be the last time, that some of you do- you never know.’ Said one of the professors.

‘...Oh... No...!’ Some of them make the most shocking faces they have ever had in their lives. Said Emmah quickly.

Then Naddalin is not supposed to leave the- castle, Jinger- even if we are all gone?

- Besides-

Come on girls- she whispered- and all the girls heard Emma’s thoughts in their minds- of the way- and it was not good- not good.

(‘The thoughts that were shared in their brains... And- yes, let us go, and leave her to her thoughts, I can see she is lost in them and wants to be left alone.’)

And said Naddalin, sitting up, I can ask her how- come she- never mentioned Lily when she- told me all about my parents! Or why she wanted me brain- dead so bad.

Beyond the girls roll their eyes and walk out the room thinking she is completely... mad.

-And-

Some time had passed... with further discussion of Tirus Black was not what Jinger had had in mind, and that Naddalin was nowhere to be found.

Or we could have a game of fallen angel chess where all the pieces are different angles- and powers, on the train ride home... Emma- said discussed and hurriedly- to all the other girls we gotten to know.

Otherwise, or checkers; Serafina left a set and said, 'I bet I'll bet yah!'

-And-

"And no, let us visit with all the girls, for this light night we have and not fight," said Emma, and then also said Naddalin firmly, agreeing that she did not want to be the blame for them fighting among themselves- just over a book.

So, they got their fine clothes from their dormitories and set off through the- portrait hole- into the station- back to the real world, and their hometowns. On the train, the games start, and they are extremely competitive. All the girls with their magical board games- in the competition were the pieces of the board come alive in front of their eyes.

Down through the- empty castle- Naddalin did her nightly walks, and her seances in witchcraft contacting the dead- from her room, and out through the- oak front doors, to the one oak tree she brought back for her homeland and property for seedlings.

She made her way now flying down the- lawn, week yet making flight along with a shallow trench in the- glittering, powdery snow, her socks and the- hems of her glitter- almost gray and silvery sparkling- yet at times transparent- and translucent Robes was soaked completely and totally and freezing, yet she was able to fly ones more. A moment of delight for her... in a time of sadness and feeling alone.

Not even thinking rationally she- went into the forbidden forest looked as though it had been enchanted- with all that is dark creepy mysterious, each tree smattered with silver, and McDermott's Victorian cottage in white looked like an iced cake, she had her own home, not far away...

Jinger knocked, but there was no answer when she made her rounds little did Naddalin know- that she was teleporting back and forth to make sure that she did not do anything crazy, foolish, and irrational, or only plain stupid- and she did...

‘Christ-’ she did what I was afraid of... and she looks out and sees a- girl 100 feet up, flying wildly- at times, like- as if she going to snag the weathervanes on some the towers.

‘This girl is trying to see how many times she can test fate and die...’ Then in thought, she said- ‘she has to be out of her mind, with wondering why- yet I am standing here looking at her asking the same very thing.’

‘Hum- nothing surprises me anymore...’ she modeled. Then in the next thought- (Well so much for spending time with the girls on the train... playing games and having fun, I see here that I will be babysitting, I see... I see- yah, happy Christmas to me.) ...She was clapping her hands; then and at that moment said Emmah, who was shivering under her robe when off into the star-filled moonlight of night after her. It was an odd night, unlike others there was a large crescent moon.

Jinger had her ear to the- door- and then crack it open slightly, just after getting her to come down and get inside take a bath and get ready for bed, yet Naddalin is talking to the marrow, seeing if there were any writings of messages for the other side coming through- on what to do next.

The marrow of dishonesties in the girl's massive bathing room... and she is standing there in the nude, looking into it, in a trance... but showing perfectly, in a gray

dimly lit room, with heavy steam- and candle everywhere. She was mumbling insanities... eyes rolling in the back of her head all you could see were the whites of the ball.

And- there is a weird noise, coming out of the body in places I do not want to say... as if hell was going to break throw... her face was changing, into others, that were neither one of the bodies in-which she keeps.

The voices coming out of her mouth I knew it was HER, and that she was not crazy... yet me saying it would make me look crazy... in trying to prove it... that Naddalin was right, you can prove them to blame, there always blameless and find a way-out.

‘Naddalin she-’ said...

‘Listen- come, come to bed it's time...’ She said over and over.

She turns to like, and the hunt of the woman ripped through her, the candles blow out with no warning, a child through her body of evil, a terror that she never felt before...

‘Is that Fang, I, see?’ (She thought- and that thought was being shared if she liked it or not.) I will kill you- by clawing your eyes out- the possessed - Naddalin said, and feed on your eyeballs... for a snack. Leave...! And Jinger ran... fast than ever before in this life, she was given.

-And-

Emmah put her ears to the- door too... after seeing this girl running for what she said was her life into the girl's dorm- room, Emmah transported back to the castle, over what was called an emergency- of attempted final- homicide.

From inside low, throbbing moans, of a girl laying on the floor nude, that looked as if she was in a coma of dangerous unconsciousness as if the loss of all fallen- angel- azure unoxygenated blood.

‘And- I think we’d better get someone?’

‘A doctor?’ She spoke.

‘More like a witch- doctor... to perform and exercise.’

‘...And that to- DON’T, STAND, THERE, GO- AND GET HELP!’ And said Jinger tensely.

And professor- McDermott- she may be able to get inside their soul at this point, and end this!

And called- out to others that may be here, that can help even the ghosts, that haunt the halls.

Naddalin, thumping the floor in compulsions- door slammed and no one was there just them. Then what seemed like an eternity- McDermott, and some other girls were there at her side? As Jinger was showing in a hologram what she saw in her mind played out for them to see before their eyes. Tombstones litter the front yard, black trees with curly branches that look as if they would seize at you. With a gray-blue sky in the

background, hints of sinful lime-green are glowing around the- home, one light one in a cracked arch window, glowing in wicked.

-And-

I am meeting Emmah Kizziah for what feels like the first time when I wake up a year or two has passed.' Hayvannah raised her eyebrows, to me I do not know you either... yet I did, I was lost...

'You almost passed for the last time,' Hayvannah said.

Emmah said... 'Hi- you know me... even if you don't want to at times... ha-like- I have changed, yet not that much my hair is longer and an assorted color.'

'You are meeting Emmah Kizziah? Today?' the new girl asked, as she helps Naddalin up and out of her bed... for what seemed like a lifetime- of reliving a part- of the girl's life she took over to hide inside a lingering soul.

'Er... listen, do you want to come with us- girls are flying for the first time, before lunchtime- we know you like that? Said- Emmah.

'Do you want to come with me?'

'Yeah... well, she- asked me to, so I thought I would.'

'She would-' you even said it would not matter if she did.'

'Oh... well... that was nice of her.'

But then again, Hayvannah did not sound as though she would have- thought it was nice at all. On the- divergent, her manner was cold and suddenly, she would- looked rather unfriendly.

A few more minutes passed in total silence, Naddalin drinks her coffee so fast that she- would soon need a fresh cup, just to keep going- she was drinking increasingly- to feel as if she were not half-dead on the inside.

Beside them, Riley Davies and her girlfriend seemed glued together at the- lips.

Hayvannah's hands were lying on the- table beside her coffee and Naddalin was feeling a mounting pressure to take hold of it after already drinking her cup of coffee.

'Just do it,' Naddalin- told herself, as a fount of circulated alarm and pleasure and excitement surged up inside her chest; just reach out and grab it- she thought. Emmah seemed even more clingy than before, the attack like she was living one day at a time with her as if it were the last, she would spend with her ever.

Amazing, how much more difficult it was to extend her arm twelve inches, and touch Emmah's hands, feeling love, than it was to snatch, about her past, to her when she already could understand, then a speeding bat fly by and she caught it from midair... and its fangs bit into her flesh and started to suck out life from her body, where her precious blood.

But just as she- moved her hands forwards, Hayvannah took hers off the- table, thinking she could be a need in the unwanted hart thobe of lust and love with someone she did not know- and too she liked boys.

Some of the girls just looked and smiled as Emmah was saying- to Hayvannah- ‘you well- in time, like US girls...’ and she playfully winked at her.

She would- was now watching Riley Davies kissing her girlfriend with a mildly interested expression.

‘She- asked me out, you know,’ she would- said in a quiet voice.’

A couple of weeks ago. ‘Riley, I turned her down, though.’

Naddalin, who had grabbed the- sugar cookies on the platter to excuse the sudden lunging movement across the- table, could not think why she would- and was telling her that she was falling too. Yet she was... falling for a girl, all over again.

If she would- wished- she would- was sitting at the- next table, being she- artily kissed by Riley Davies, why had she would- agreed to come out with her?

She- said nothing... Their scab threw another handful of confetti over them; counting down the new year- of their world, some of it landed in the- last cold dregs of coffee Naddalin had been about to drink, that was not hers.

‘I went in there with Lily last year,’ said Hayvannah.

In her- second or so it took for her to take in what she would- had said, Naddalin's insides had become glacial.

She- could not believe she would- wanted to talk about Lily now, while kissing couples surrounded them and a cherub floated over their heads.

Hayvannah's voice was high when she would- yet spoke again.

'I've been meaning to ask you for ages... did Lily- like did she- ever in a chat mention me at all before she- died?' I like this girl yet, only knew her by her last name; what was her name?

'Why do you care-? It does not matter... now she was gone forever.' One girl said, back that was snotty... in a hast.

Well, most of the girls looked at her- like it was not nice, yet true.

If you say- that you think you were falling for her, we can see what we can do to bring her back to life?

'You- a looking for a girlfriend?' Emmah said, in a kiddish way.

'I don't know if I am ready for a girlfriend?' Said Hayvannah.

She was the- very last subject on earth Naddalin wanted to discuss, and least of all with Hayvannah.

‘Well, no,’ she- said quietly. There was not time for her to say anything.
Erm... so... did you... did you get to see a lot of others over the- holidays- or is she the one for you?

‘I just thought she was cute, that’s all.’

‘Like- boys never get it right... the last one I had called me a bitch, looking for a dinner plate also.’

‘Come to the dark side... as you can see, we’ve got cookies.’ Said Riley.

Well, support you-? And- the game moves one with the next move, her voice sounded falsely bright and cheery, saying- ‘there a girl out there for me I’m- sure here, I just need to find her or she finds me, I not looking.’

To Naddalin’s horror, she- saw that her eyes were swimming with tears again, just as they had been after the- last meeting before Christmas, back before her change as some call it.

Everyone was contented, yet not truly fully happy- ‘life is life is not...?’ Said Naddalin, along with saying moments after in a murmur- and with the shakes, of some that were deceased- in the real world, with something like Parkinson’s- and dementia...

‘...You can get close- yet never fully there- in the life of happiness and or keep it- just like them and/or of things.’

Naddalin- 'Look,' she- said desperately, leaning in so that nobody else could overhear,' let us not talk about Lily right now... let us talk about something else, 'Oh like you and Emmah and the PDA'n you to have been- doing.'

Portion

But she was quite the- wrong thing to say about.

'I thought,' after saying, she would- said, tears spattering down on to the-table,'

'I thought you would understand! I needed to talk about it, and that I was falling more than just what I am! Surely- you need to talk about it too!'

'I mean, you saw it happen, didn't you?' I will not want to talk about it said Naddalin, my mind has had enough.

Everything was going nightmarishly wrong; Riley Davies's girlfriend had even unglued herself to look round at Hayvannah crying.

'Well, I have talked about it,' Naddalin said in a mumble,' to Jinger and Emmah, but and to the new girl now...'

'She is not to be trusted don't fall in love with that...'

Like you would know?

'I know you better than you think- a little girl, I was also...'

'I am not you...' She spoke.

‘Then do it...’ Said Naddalin.

‘Oh, you will talk to Emmah Kizziah! Also, about this you find someone here that you love, and I know her >This Girl< here she will help- you do So-o.’

She would- said shrilly, her face was now shining with tears- that sparkled in the light like glass shards.

Several more kissing couples broke apart to stare at the sight of the girl that was crying what looked to be glass crystals, and so hurt over lust- and love, and what she could not have- that was feeling like her old life of forbidden.’

‘Um- maybe it would be best if we just... paid for this food... cram it, and you went and met up with Emmah Kizziah like you noticeably wanted to!’

‘And..., (sniffle) and..., (sniffle) and..., (sniffle) ... I will well go to my room, rot, and cry, like a little girl that I am.’

‘But you see none of these girls will talk to me!’ she said walking down the halls of the schools.

Naddalin stared at them, utterly bewildered, as she would- seized a frilly napkin and dabbed at her shining face with it- cutting her face and the blue azure color ran like blood from the gashes and was making the glassy tears look as if their shards of Arctic glacier ice.

‘Hayvannah...?’ She- said weakly, wishing Riley would seize her girlfriend and start kissing her again to stop her ogling at her and Emmah.

‘Go on, leave!’ she would- said, now crying into the- napkin.’

I do not know why you asked me out in the- first place... if it was not for real... Naddalin said do not feel bad, I have to say here to... not everyone wants me here, and it is going to be the same for you- for you do not like them. ‘That’s- a life- even in the afterlife.’

‘Like if you’re going to make arrangements to meet other girls right after me... staying here in my room you can save it...’ ‘How many are you meeting after Emmah? Like... you have been through a lot?’ Why can’t you keep them?

‘That was compounded questions... well...?’

‘I will say with you- if you like...? (She just looked up at her blushing,) I must! I do not have to save anything for a child like you must respect me, and that is not what you thought to have; but if you must know it was over trust... and falling out of love with them- or the other way around.’

‘It’s not like that!’ Said Naddalin, and she- was so relieved at finally understanding what she would- was... yet annoyed about that too, she- laughed, and the tears stopped, which she- realized a split second too late was also a mistake- to start doing in the first place.

Hayvannah sprang to the feet at that moment. The- whole team was quiet and everybody was watching them now, even if they were on the train ride back home half of their mind, was looking tough to them on the other side and was looking at them talking to one another about their personal lives, though one side of their face and put one of those girls eyes, as if they were there too- they could see, hear, and feel it all.

I will see you around, she would- said to the girl, that was been nasty dramatically harsh, and hiccoughing slightly Naddalin- dashed to the- door, wrenched it open and hurried down the halls and long corridors out the first door off into the- pouring rain, to have a moment alone, even if she is never.

‘Naddalin!’ Hayvannah called after she left, but the- door had already swung shut behind her, looking them apart, and she was not able to open without a scalation key... (that was always around her neck,) she was feeling better and worse about the mean things she said to her.

There was total silence within the- café Hayvannah walk to town in the grays of colors and the flurries of snow all around, looking for her, when everyone eyes were on her over not liking what she said to Naddalin after all this was the girl that said it was okay for her to be here and took her out a pure hell.

Naddalin- She- threw a Gallon of milk down, at the town market, on to the- table, a golden longstanding register was all she could see, not even her eyes at this point would pick over, the counter, she shook pink confetti out of the hair; from it littering the areas- outside...

Just before she walked into the store, the clocks- like the one that was just like the one from her hometown, with the big was a glowing face was making a showed with hand on the hour...

That ticked- talked down, the new year- she saw a girl getting wind blows down the pathway; she did not see Naddalin, behind her as she followed Hayvannah, as she went out of the- door.

It was snowing hard now, and she would- not have even noticed her that she was nowhere to be seen; even if she did not realize that she was walking right behind her. Getting ever so closer with every step.

She- simply did not understand what had happened; half an hour ago they had been getting along fine, and they were fighting.

‘Lady!’ She- muttered furiously, sloshing down she- the now knee-deep snow, falling the street with her hands in the pockets, to keep them from the cold and frostbite.’

What did she want to talk about Lily for, anyway?

Why does she- always want to drag up a subject that makes her act like a wild mare- that wants to buck off the rider?’

She- turned right and broke into an icy run, and within minutes she- was turning into the- doorway of the tree graveyards into the up to the pathway that leads to the bridge that leads up the school and castle, thousands of feet up, she knew that she could not fly over this even if she wanted too, yet another reason why she went to town,

for an ointment for the feathers on her wings, to help them mend, and have them groomed, by trusted hands- by a man she has known for years, in what looks like a 1920s barbershop.

She knew the flight was risky, even if she did not fear final death at this point, it was not worth it when she real- at this point was contented to live.

Naddalin- she- knew she- was too early to meet Emmah, at this point, and was not ready to meet up with the one, that she was following behind, and she was already in the air making her flight a- crossed- a remarkable sight the gush to wind would knock you back- from the speed that she was able to capture- and the majesty was brilliant- as she would score- higher than an American Eagle.

After that, she went to a coffee shop- within the walls of the castle- on the 13th floor, but she- thought it there would be someone in there with whom she- could spend the- dominant time, of her night.

She- shook the wet hair out, that fell longer than her butt, her eyes needing rubbing, she looked around, and yet again there was no one around, just a waiter.

Then moments passed, then hours, night become day, she dozed off, just to wake up in nods to see McDermott was sitting alone in a corner; looking down- too, she did not have anything to go home to So-o she stayed too.

‘Hi, McDermott!’ She- said, when she- had squeezed through the- crammed both and pulled up a chair beside her.

McDermott jumped and looked down at Naddalin as though she- barely recognized her, EVEN IF HER FACE WAS INCHES FORM HERS.

Naddalin saw that she- had two fresh cuts on the faces and several new bruises yet was feeling stronger and stronger on the inside- she was making a full recovery- she just needs everyone out of her head and some time to be nothing but quiet.

‘Oh, it’s you, Naddalin,’ said McDermott.’ Yes, all right- ‘Yeah, I’m fine,’ lied Naddalin who was like 75% healthier than the day before; but, next to the battered and mournful- looking McDermott, she- felt she- did not have much to complain about, that was looking like rotting death, walking.’

‘Er- are you sure you're- OKAY?’

‘Me?’ said McDermott.’

‘Oh yes, I am grand and still full of life, Naddalin, was grand with excitement- saying, ‘I feel I will be a lot like you someday.’’

She- gazed into the- depths of the aquarium tankard- of fish-like creatures inside, which was the size of an of a room, that was in the on the one side of the room, and sighed, saying- ‘...and they think back home, that we came from that if the monkey was not bad enough.’

Portion

Naddalin did not know what to say to her, when she said, 'I feel you will outlive me, your blood is far more valuable than mine- and you are far more power than-me.'

They sat side by side in silence for a moment. Then McDermott said brusquely, 'In the same boat, yeh and me, ant' we, honey?'

'Er' said Naddalin, followed by saying- 'I suppose So-o.'

'Yeah... I have said it before... both outsiders, alike like- none of them will ever be fully you- even if they still,' said McDermott, nodding wisely.

'And both orphans inside you to make one with the strength of two, you become your more than them, and most- even if... even if... yes... orphans- they are- that- odium, and you too but remember- why? Why... you have made it more than them- and have not fallen too them, it is a question of why- in the first place, that made you become whom you were meant to be- part of your story- to make there is, yet you are at the top, remember why- the true way.'

She- took a great swig from the mug- increased coffee- I need to keep going, she thought.

'Makes a difference, having a decent family,' she- said, back.

'Yes, maybe So-o; yet I feel that you have always had one you just failed to notice, in your thoughts or feel as if you were not wanted.'

‘My dad was decent, I loved my dad and lost him too young, my mom was not, and the same for the second time around, Dad was decent, and now look at what I did to him like the other it was all over me being in their life that their end too soon.’

‘If they had lived, life without me, or them interfering would- a bit different, eh?’

‘You can’t change a plan even if you have said that in your own story- be proud of your story- in black and white- it’s best to remember that.’

‘Yeah... I am spouse,’ said Naddalin cautiously.

McDermott was in a very strange mood, she thought yet motherly and that was nice when she never- ever really had that.

‘Family,’ said McDermott gloomily.’ Whatever yes say, the blood’s important... yet is not everything,’ She- wiped- saying ‘I have had the bodies of 4 girls before me, as I am now- I have a life now- for around 4,000 years a trickle of it out of her eye, saying take them and see my memories, this may be the night, that I must say goodbye- forever, ...I have seen more than one millennium, it is time to lay at rest- next to the other bones in the yard.’

‘Ms. McDermott,’ said Naddalin, unable to stop herself,’ where are you getting all these injuries, on your hands and limes?’

‘All those!’ said Naddalin, pointing at McDermott’s face, saying you are being eaten by the death- and part of death is time.

‘I not- okay, I am disintegrating like the blacked dart- that I am made of showing thought- over time, nothing lasts forever, soon if I choose not to lay at rest; I will become black dust blowing in the wind- with nothing left by to by sweep away in a dust pain.’

‘Eh?’ said McDermott, looking startled- at the look of the young girl carrying.’

‘Oh... that’s only normal bumps an’ bruises, Naddalin,’ said, wanting to think that McDermott dismissively- said... “do not be afraid of death,’ I was not, the first time, and I not going to be this time ...even if... this time is to burn, for a life of not wanting too.”’

She- drained the mug, set it back on the- table, booth... as Naddalin got to her feet.

‘I’ll be seeing’ yes, Naddalin... take care of now.’ Naddalin knew she would not be seeing her ever again.

And she- lumbered out of the- pub looking wretched, and disappeared into the- torrential blizzard, after walking, yet again all the corridors- for something to do, out in the weather for air, even if she was high up along a veranda of the castle.

Naddalin watched her go to the beyond that night, feeling miserable, as she tried not to look back, even if she had to stop- to defog the shop's window with her palm, to look at her one last time before walking on.

McDermott was unhappy and she- was hiding something, but she- seemed determined not to accept help. What was going on? But before Naddalin could think about it any further, she- heard a voice calling her name.

‘Naddalin! Naddalin, over there!’

Emmah was waving at her from the tower above- for her side of the- room and veranda, saying... ‘come inside and meet me up here, instantly she was there, in a spell of teleport, Emmah was in her head and making her no if and or butts, to get inside, and be by her side.’

She- got up and made the way towards her through her- saying, ‘well you stand by me forever- and never leave me? I fear being alone and the unknown.’ She said to Emmah in a strong hug that she would not break- away.

She- was still a few feet away when she- realized that Emmah was alone- too and feeling about the same in law.

She would- was sitting at the end of her bed with the- unlikeliest pair of slippers on her feet, that were so old they were crusty. ‘I can’t let them go...’ she said ‘there like part of me...’ she- could ever have imagined: a night without them just like her pillow- and blankie too.

Danna Lovegood was the same, she had a stuffed pink bunny, and still sucked her middle and ring fingers as she slept- and it sounds inappropriate at times. All girls- like us come with corks...

Rita Skeeter, a journalist on the- Star press and one of Emmah's least favorite people in-the-world, was on her way to get the story, about McDermott final passing, and I had nothing to say, yet I was the last to have said anything, like- why is always me, that gets the spotlight when I do not want it?

I thought you were with Hayvannah, I was not expecting you for another hour at least!' 'You're early!' Said Emmah, moving along to give her room to sit down for the interview.'

'I am- a-going to say this now- the shit...! ...you put into this better make this one here, look good- she been through enough- or kick your ass to your head- got that.'

'Hayvannah? - Who came back to see all the fuss, just for some moments before teleporting back with them on the train ride home with the others.'

Rita said at once- if they were having sex- and all that girl like them do, twisting around on her butt to stare avidly at Naddalin- Emmah did.' Who was a loss of wards...?'

'A girl... can be a friend to other girls here without you dating her right?' That was said back...

Emmah- 'And even if we are, that for us to care about not you... get to talk about why you're here or get lost.' Hayvannah- in a rage!

'It's none of your business if Naddalin's been with a hundred girls,' Emmah told Rita coolly, this is not what this story is about after all.

‘So, you can put that away right now.’

‘This is about final memory and obituary- not my sex- life...’

Rita had been on the point of withdrawing a corrosive blue quill from her bag... to override the words, that are always type automatically.

Looking as though she’d- had been forced to swallow hard- Naddalin said- ‘I don’t care what you say in this paper’ ...and then she kissed Emmah on the lips just to make her happy, say whatever you want- both agreed at this point to get her away from them, and both were saying everything or anything she wanted to her, or she would not leave... ‘till she got here story her way- she sat there for 3 hours- looking into Naddalin’s eyes spine-chillingly, she’d- snapped her bag shut again; saying- ‘I think I have my story here.’

‘What are you up to- girlie?’

Danna, her friend, was saying come one day we need to get back to the town, pressroom, I will walk with you I need some air anyways, the girls knew this was just a diversion- yet worked.

Naddalin asked, sitting down- after getting up to meet Danna saying- ‘OMG thanks,’ (in a whisper) and staring at Rita, walking away bouncing out the door with every footstep... uniform skirt fluttering...

Emmah- ‘yep,’ she said looking dazed, her eyes were crossed, Naddalin said, ‘well- well- well- this is going to be rich- no?’

‘Little Miss. Perfect was just about to tell me when you arrived- when you walked in a took my story away,’ said Rita, taking a large slurp of her drink, walking with Danna.’

Emmah- I suppose was allowed to talk for you to her, I- was right?’ She would- shoot at her looking back with one brow up.

‘Yes, I suppose you are,’ said Naddalin said aloofly.

Unemployment did not suit Rita, so she shut up after the last threats of having her shity job.

Emmah’s- her- hair that had once been set in elaborate curls now hung lank and unkempt around the face.

Naddalin- ‘You are looking more like me every day- in the not caring...’ and she touched her hair loose- curls, saying ‘I still love yes.’

‘Same back...’

‘It’s what on the inside that counts...right... he- he.’

The- crimson paint, hand on the light post matched the holiday feel, and the color of Rita two-inch nails- that was chipped, shorter and shorter with every bit she made, and there were a couple of false jewels missing from her ring to on her hand, her nerves were that bad, that she was even picking her scabs again.

She would- took another great gulp of her drink and said out of the- corner of her mouth,’ Pretty girl, she is... Naddalin?’

‘What you're saying this all over the fact that you like her- you have a piss-poor way of showing it.’

(We/us- Naddalin- and I, were) Looking into Danna's mind- she was doing everything she could to keep calm. ‘One more word about Naddalin’s and Emmah’s love life and the- deal is off, of helping keep this job, and that’s a promise,’ said Emmah irritably-

‘What deal?’ said Rita, wiping her mouth on the- back of the sleeve of her right hand.’

‘You haven’t mentioned a deal yet, Miss. Prissy, you just told me to turn up- and you had something in it for me.’

‘Yes, but you are taking it too far- and blowing it all out-a proportion...’

‘What does that mean? ...Out- a proportion...?’

‘So-o, this was a way to get to her, you never- ever read a card about me... is that it, God that’s low and creepy?’

Find someone who cares, why don’t you?’

‘Oh, one of these days...’

‘Yes, yes, one of these days you will write more horrible stories about Naddalin and me- and others, I am sure of this, yet you’ll be doing it without a job, said Emmah indifferently- you’re going to say shit about the wrong person- okay- you have been warned.’ This is what was said in a letter to her boss, 3 or so days later.

She would- take a deep shuddering breath, I would be the one to kiss and love her- and her eyes glitter- as she graded both of her hands in a tight hold.

They have run plenty of horror stories about Naddalin this year without my help- she said- and I must do as they say,’ said Rita, shooting a sideways look at her over her- top of her glass, when she met up with her the next day over yet more coffee and adding in a rough whisper,’ how has that made you feel, Naddalin...? Distraught...? Betrayed...? Misunderstood...?’

‘It’s all in the fact, that I want you!’ she said sheepishly. Naddalin looked at her astonished and completely flabbergasted.

‘She- feels angry, of course,’ said Emmah in a hard, clear voice. She is not into you so back off.’

‘For the reason that she told Martita for Magic she- truth and she- Martita’s too much of an idiot to believe her.’

‘So, you stick to it, do you, that She- who must not be named is back- and I can turn you over to her and her girls if you don’t become my lover?’ Said Rita. Now how do you like that...? ...Lowering her glass and exposing Naddalin, in ways that were

wrong with a piercing stare while she fingers strayed longingly to the- clasp of her bra, in the low light of the café.’

‘Your mine... all mine, now- I have paid to them for this... you can do this for me.’

Emmah did not like it, yet there was not a thing she could do, looking at this girl have her way, like always- you know who was at the bottom of it all, even in the press- it was rigged.

You stand by all the garbage Duerre’s been telling everybody, even if you cannot prove a thing, about you, know who return, and be the blame, and you being the- sole witness, about Lily too, being in on it, like I am now- try it- and you be the one, looking crazy, and disport- and then I’ll say you raped me- and I have the press behind me to say it... also- hey- you can sit your pretty little ass in the jail!’

Emmah ran and attacked, yet a magical beam of energy- from her hand pushed back flying and hitting the wall, wings out, and the fight was bloody between the two of them, fang ripping even, Emmah left limping away, and left-wing next broken if not completely, and her neck ripped open.

‘There will never- ever be- sole witness,’ snarled Naddalin, we get it- I know it.

There were dozen-odd death devourers there as well- all tricked to feel, I was the bad girl.

(Thought Naddalin-)

‘Want their names- Rita screamed it you feel you have a case?’

‘I’d love them all’ she said. And then moments after stated, ‘even if you do not get that kind of love- do you understand- So-o you say whatever you like, and do whatever you like to me- quite honestly...

I do not care either way,’ breathed Naddalin. Now fumbling in her bag once more- for a tissue and gazing at her as though she- was the- most beautiful thing she would- had ever seen- yet she had too as if she were under her spell, and she was- or just playing the game of not having a choice.’

A great bold headline: ‘- Blames...’ A subheading- saying: Culpability,
‘Naddalin -

The name was there as the mastermind to a story that was too hard to believe: all of them were there, and newly named- ‘The Death Sisters’ are still among us, and the mother the most powerful of all- has been reviled.’

Besides, then beneath a nice big photograph of you, ‘Disturbed teenage survivor of you know who attacks the innocent, like Naddalin-, for over 100 years, and it also reviled that she was- NEVAEH, causing outrage all day, by accusing respectable and prominent members of the- magician and fallen angel community...’

There was a sound of heavy footsteps, then the- door creaked open slightly.

Emmah stood there with her eyes red and swollen, tears splashing down her- in front of her face, say you never told me this, yet I realize why you could not.

For once, someone did something for me... and you know they are going to kill her for this... yet, I have to say thank you, and move on- or it will eat at me like cancer.

‘Also, you have heard everything now? Has it changed anything with you?’

‘Not at all...’ she said back.

And the screams were heard for Malcolm- the girls burrowed, their- fangs into her flesh, sucking the life out of Rita's neck, yet she will always be remembered- in the graveyard with a stone, that is the largest around- for helping me, for her outspoken words of having a voice, and courage, sometimes a friend is a girl, that you would least expect.

The question for me though is still- WHY!

Interval: 3

Hell's Purgatory

Moonlight-

You want to say there is no God, or that you well not saver Jesus, then take across like the one I wore around my nick for years, and threw it into the trash, and let it there, if it goes to a landfill and stays there then you know that you are an atheist, I did

this yet I had to go get it, I'll never go there all the way, yet I am here over what I did wrong in my first life... and I still question testament why I am here, and not there, yet the best part is I don't care. Just like you all... why do you care?

Why?

(Back)

Naddalin was about to collapse over the weight of McDermott's death and feeling, yet once more like she was the cause of it all.

And yet was rescued by Jinger and Emmah, who each seized McDermott under an arm and shoved her back into that chair she falls out of at the point of her death.

McDermott allowed herself to be steered into a chair and slumped over the table, some would have just thought she was sleeping, or sobbing uncontrollably, her face glazed with tears that dripped down into the tangled beard. Yet some like me did not think they were the last ones ever for her.

And McDermott, what is it, the help you need? Said Emmah, horrified.

Naddalin spotted an official-looking letter lying- with her name on it too familiar to her in times of death, for her to open on the- table. And it was McDermott- testament- of everything she had kept throughout the years- and staggering net worth 35 million dollars, all now- yours- 'more money than you will know to do with' it said- 'yet it is yours, to keep- and to keep you happy and safe- when I am gone?'

-And-

What is it saying...? The girls asked...

Blink- Blink- is all Naddalin did with her jaw dropped.

Naddalin's sobs redoubled, but she- shoved her- letter in her hip pocket, before someone asked her to read aloud:

Further to our inquiry into the- attack by them and the best student in my class, we have accepted, the fact that I have lived too long and need to save you from yourself, even if they are after you know you have the power and money more than they will ever- be smart and use it wisely.

Do not cry over me, it was time- to live in this place forever. Take NO responsibility for me- or the regrettable incident of them, they will never stop- why we may never know, that is for you to find out.

Harmoniously, well, that's- okay then, said Jinger, clapping at the fact that Naddalin was now a millionaire, grabbing and squeezing her- shoulder saying congratulations- you will live forever and never die you have too much money to die.

‘There is no way that can get at you now...’

‘I wouldn't say that-’ she said back in an uneasy reply- ‘they will find some other way- with them there is always a way.’

But Naddalin continued to sob and waved one of her hands in front of her face, the long sleeve of her sweater was covering part of her hand, yet she was alluding to read on.

~*~

And then, an announcement...

Heads up girls, this just in- Just today we got a new girl in after she smoked a Tide pod in a bong, and accidentally killed herself... by trying to be cool on Facebook- to her loser friends that think ingesting chemicals if funny.

Naddalin said- 'well that's a new one, and dumb like I never heard in all my years.'

Megan, a girl that was showing her around said- 'well she really sweet and very shy- be nice, she was after just trying to be cool.'

'Melissa- you are 14 years old, what the HELL; do you have the mentality of a 5-year-old? Some were shouting... in the room.

'Either way, death is death... she said, I am happy today young, and go to hell doing it, send me down!' She spoke.

Karly said, 'don't feel bad- like- I knew a girl that tried smoking a tampon, so don't worry you're normal!'

'It is our job to take them from life...' deaths angels, some call us even if we do not like that terminology, I sometimes think it true we rip little girls away for their mommies' and-a daddies.'

‘However, we must register our concern about girls just you and question if we need to step in and look at them- before the end- or just take-um.’

So-o, what is this... hells... Purgatory?

‘In a way yes... unless- you want out, or have the money... in.’

‘We have decided to uphold the- official complaint of Mr. Lucius Mallerie and the matter will, therefore, be taken to the- Committee for she- Throwing away of Hazardous Beings... it just feels wrong... some said- even if it the kids dumb.’

‘I feel like a baby killer, I did not want to take her,’ said Megan one of the death angels.

‘After- all there just little kids...’

The new girl started chatting with the girls saying- ‘I wanted to save- the taste of flavor the flavor, and save it for later, for I was a giver and him a taker, I lived for danger.’

‘OMG- I loved her,’ said Haven...

‘OMG- you look just like her... I was here in another life- he- he.’ She spoke.

‘More is- arriving, and there is nothing to go to them about its already done, this all will take place on January 20th, around a month away-’ said a professor in an authoritative voice, ‘...and we ask you to present yourself at Crête the orientation in front

of the- Committees for Pennsylvania for the new girls bright in on that date, in the best way possible.'

-And-

'As you know this goes by alphabetical order, of all 50 states, and then worldly; before someone asks the dumb question; Pa girls are coming in the hundreds- it is just some of these young lady's times', that all.'

Yours in fellowship... praying time stars- on your knees girls- they were all huddled in a circle, and in the center- they were literally in the heart of the dark lord- ora, resembled as the star in the wood flooring, light by flaming torches- (all of the eyes rolling and shaking muttering chants- to the dark God or death to keep their soul looked here and not banished to the underworld lower,) at this time... remember what that means, study tarot your cards, dark magic, wigi-boards, books, wands, flying, crystals, potions, magical seances, stay locked in a trance of magical, and death itself as an art form, and remember why your here, and not there.

Naddalin- 'And just last week, I was licking the corn out of others shit, just to survive... now look at me; I have it all, and still, I have everything to lose, and nothing- even if that is everything, that I need to live.'

(In the background there was chatter.)

'There followed a list of the- Hayvannahol councils, so there is nothing you girls and can say or do, it's been said and done, more girls are coming here.'

‘Oh,’ said Jinger...

-And-

‘Committee, make the plans on life and death...’

‘But- but- yeah- do not know, these dangerous creatures?’

‘They're just a new girl like you.’

‘You were a new girl at one time, were you not?’

“‘Ornaments of disposal-’ there just babies, look at the ages here! Said Emmah, this one is 9, and she ended her own life.’

‘Why...?’

‘...That is a question, I still can answer.’ Whispered, Naddalin.

And McDermott, had her wings ripped away at a youthful age, didn’t she?

Naddalin, whipped her eyes on her sleeve, saying- ‘yes, sad but true.’

‘Also, they have some interesting creatures, coming here to where our colors!’

‘I am scared...’ said the one in the back.

~*~

-And-

Naddalin, then spoke up, saying- ‘I have had my wings ripped off many times too with only the hopes of magic to grow them back; the gashes in my were back unbelievable and deep and bloody scaring in many ways, something you have never seen before in your life, I am sure of that, she said... to Emmah who was sitting right beside her holding her hand tightly, along with saying- ‘I have been broken, in so many ways- in every way a girl can be broken.’

‘It was by them,’ she said to me- me being Emmah.

Then she said, ‘not long after when I was a younger girl in the battle, that I wrote about in book 1, a fight that was so-o unbelievable, and there was so-o strong, and I was so-o weak, I did not understand why I do now... um, like with everything- I learned that, um the hard way too.’ She shuddered to say.

Later that night, some of the girls walked to their lost mentors’ home, to clean it out, and go through what was not Naddalin’s.

A sudden sound from the- corner of McDermott’s odd cottage made Naddalin, Jinger, And Emmah whip around.

Becca and the others were lying in the- corner in the window set, Hayvannah moping on about something that was oozing all over the- bench, it was silver sparkly Passion Dust all of us girls have vaginal fluids that are sparkly when we have a natural discharging- just something we magical girls do- when turned on or- really said the color changes to the mood- a sliver of sadness, just like a cut will glass when opening upon us in this magical world, a shad of azure that shimmers.

‘Hurry up...!’

Hayvannah- ‘My horse, Charlotte, was with the chariot, the windows frosted, and glowing warmly, and I cannot leave her tied up out there in her- snow, any longer- girls come one, it is feeling cruel!’

‘I think- I am good here’ said, Naddalin still heartbroken.

...Hayvannah was the caretaker of 10 white flying horses, her main was already getting frosted white gleaming ice crystals, looking like the trees tipped after a have snow.

‘Enough rummaging thought McDermott things.’

‘You have not heard, everything here in this home including the home is now mine,’ said Naddalin- ‘including this, she held out in her hand what they were looking for a hoary key to the banks, vaults- to inherent her new-found fortune.’

‘All and everything she own is, now even the town! To ensure her prolonged life...’

‘So-o, at Christmas, this was your gift, it said in this, and she held up the will.’ She spoke.

‘Um-hmm’ she mumbled quietly.

-And-

‘And you really- say that, as no-one loved you- mmm- U-MMM.’

‘No, I cannot after all, and that is what caused me to have Parkinson’s disease when I was in school after everything, I have gone through this has made me what I am, then all the anxiety and stressors, and suppression of feeling and emotions, in the first place has made everything even worse, that was all I ever had wrong with me, a neurological disorder, never mind. And dementia is a side effect, something also I feel is warping my mind, yet they had something to do with that also.

‘Maybe- that is why I did not... I was sick of others feeling emotions, of this and that about me- and I did not want that too- I already had enough of that in my life and life’s past.’

‘So-o that is all...’ said the girls, ‘why did you not say so... and they all felt pity for her.’

~*~

Naddalin, Jinger, and Emmah looked at one another, feeling she must be truthful, about everything she has said out of her mouth and within her mind too- you can fake memories lost in the mind- the mind of the thought of all things past does not lie.

They had never agreed with McDermott, yet Naddalin was the pet of the class, always... and neither did she, yet she had ties that were stronger... with her than with any other person; in a lot a ways’ they were the same, or maybe- it was over that she was nice and understanding or was the first to get her story and figure out everything.

~*~

Back to the dorms with the girls in their bunks, at dusk... they read feather on in the reports of newspaper magically flying around the room- and old-style text appearing, speculations- about them- the new girls coming with headlines.

‘Look at this one’ said one girl- called ‘interesting creatures’ and other people called ‘terrifying monsters’ in their hometowns.’

‘They will print anything these days’ said, Naddalin.

Even the dark ghosts that refuse to rest were all a chatter... bones from the grave that have recreated in nothing but lost a soul, over fear, for the world they are lost in.

On the- other hand, there did not seem to be any harm in breaking news, when there is some truth to, the fact, some of these new girls coming have like no IQ, to speak of...

(A week or so back)

McDermott’s was done, they said, she said- to her colleges- ‘they cannot read, they cannot write, they cannot even make a fragment... usual standards here are so much lower than what I even was going to start them with them after all-we are a school, there positively cute, and that was teaching with me ended-

I am tired... and feel I need to sojourn.’

‘So- journ- a temporary stay, that was a vague way of putting it.’

"Besides, you will have to put up a good strong defense on," said Emmah, sitting down and laying a hands-on McDermott's massive headstone; and let her wisdom pass into you, and have it locked in you forever.

Do it Naddalin take her place, ahead professor- her at the school- it was her wishes, you know bureau of magic is asking you to take her place- also your perfect for these new girls, and they would be honored to have you, feeling her shoes, or wings if you well- making you the most powerful of them all, and they who held over you well fear you.

'And I am sure you can prove everything you say and stay safe.' Said Emmah like a significant other would.

'Or I could just piss them off, and the fight will go on, and I already know, that it well, nonetheless- you know what... I want to... I want to do this... and- I WELL- EVEN IF IT KILLS, ME FOR THE LAST TIME.' Said Naddalin.

-And-

And she placed her hand upon the grave and the light streamed and beamed in vast bright white and gold rays, around her body in great power, and she was restored stronger, and more power than ever before.

~*~

A statue is a place for a wandering soul, like the one of McDermott grave displaying the fallen angel, it is a legend now, that her young depiction, of the girl on top

of the grave, will turn to face left or right from the side, that it will turn on its own honoring the God of darkness- to face the moonlight- the only light in the darkness, yet massive and heavy- the only it could move is by a dark enchantment, so it was said- that every night a child the young child of all girls in the class of flying, well lay a .9999 gold cone with the fallen angels depiction of when she was 14, on it on the head side- and on the tails, the school castle. On the one side, it says, ‘only in the darkness you can understand something clearly at last...’ and on the other the quote on her gave. Along with the year 1917.

This is done- to keep her soul at peace, a prayer by Naddalin herself, a tiny offering to her for her safekeeping, and horning her idol- to keep her evil bullies away if she could. And every night the cone goes missing... and it- its place is a fragment of Nevaeh life gives back in a paper leaf- hand-written by her ghost itself, that is added into a book, was Naddalin magically takes the text pulling it away from the paper and converts, them back into memories in her mind when looking into the thick volume.

She is fighting still for AVA and her sisters for Nevaeh’s rights, even in final death, retrieving from the enemies- to give to whom Nevaeh who is lost inside Naddalin mind, body, and soul.

1 oz Gold is worth \$1,350.29, which is nothing now-a day’s... for the new multimillionaire.

‘She knew my quote before I did,’ said Naddalin...

And was it true that Lily was albino, and had pink eyes, that she covered with blue contacts? Over the face, she was picked on for something that she could not control, and that the fact she had no skin color... and light then light hair- that was almost white, and was shy over it?

‘Yes’ was all she said back... holding her breath, and then letting it out, she whispered- ‘it was true...’

Portion

(Some time has passed)

‘Girls like her- her being Lily were so vulnerable about everything, she was just looking for someone to say it all going to be okay.’

And it really will not make any difference, how well it is, I never- ever thought she would end things that way! Said Naddalin.

Then sobbed Naddalin no more, saying- ‘this is the way it, was all meant to be.’

And the disposable devils will become my prized angels; I have the teaching job in my pocket!

Naddalin- ‘Scared her, I was never; worried yes!’

But I will worry no more!’

As you know- I and us girls have our back.

-And-

Emmah drew her finger swiftly across her backside, then gave a great moan and lurched forward, her face in her arms, saying 'you can do better than me now- and I would not stop you from finding something better.'

'I don't want SOMEONE you mean, other than you!' She said back. 'You're more than just a thing...'

(The conversation moves forward.)

'Besides, she does not enough to fear me really, she does not, and she groaned, yet she is dumb enough- to keep at me, and I want her, too I want her- this is never- ever going to be over.' Naddalin said.

'I would have to say, that I agree with you...' spoke Emmah- along with saying, 'what about Duerre, is she coming back this year or not? I do not feel like babysitting, another girl that is not going to look up to me.'

'You have been there- and done that... too many times... I know.'

I am sorry to say too, I feel as you do, I do not want to be mean either...

'Yet, I know that you would understand me when I say this and not think critically, that I do not care if she does or not.'

'I got yah,' Emmah said, with her hand on her back.

Naddalin- ‘Besides- I have got enough on the plate as is now, with keeping them Dementors out of the- castle, and the girls lurking around, and making young ladies out of these girls, in my class.’

‘And that is the only thing they can become as of now Dementors, until they can get a body or a new life, at least I can at this point keep them at bay.’

‘No easy task...’ alleged Emmah.

-And-

(A chat with all the ladies...)

The conversation began where it left off... the day or so before...

Emmah stared- to say...

‘Or maybe, you need to stop putting all your dildos, in the same drawer, if you know what I am saying.’

‘What?’ Some shouted...

Emmah went on saying- ‘Like- think about it... remember that you have your good one, your bad ones, the one that no one should see, Ya know that one... and you are anal.’ (She said that wrinkling up her face...)

‘Do you have a point here?’ Naddalin is looking at her disturbed, asking the- if.

‘I am sure, I do...’

‘Like- do not act as if they are all the one that should be in the anal drawer, just because they get up your butt... do not act as if they are all those and can be used in other ways.’

‘Nice...’

‘I will do as I say- and give all these kids a chance.

‘ME TO...’

Unanimously, they all had to agree...

Portion

Jinger and Emmah looked quickly at Naddalin, as though expecting her to start criticizing McDermott for not telling Naddalin that she- truthfully Black, child- that it was all part of the plan for him to die, to trap them.

‘It was all meant to be, don’t you see?’ She spoke.

‘He will never be my real daddy, yet he might as well be in this body... get it?’

‘No- we don’t understand...’

‘Nonetheless, Naddalin could not bring herself to do it act of criticizing her, at all even if they were somewhat right.’

They could see that Naddalin was no longer miserable and scared, to live life.

It was the first day of her new class with these new ladies. ‘Listen up, girls,’ she- said, along with saying; ‘you can’t give up.’

They all had this like- sheepish dumbfound look on their angelic faces.

Emmah said- ‘You’re right, you just need a good teacher, and you got the best here.’ She added, as asked, by Naddalin before taking the job full-time that she would have an assistant- for one-on-one time. And witness all that took place to make sure this and that was not said or said to be true or not true.

-And-

‘And Listen to her,’ Emmah, she- said, along with ‘...and you cannot give up, on yourself if we- and most of all she will not- ever- or never.

(The sweet ah-h-h’s lovingly went around the room.)

‘Emmah’s right you all, you just need to have fun as you learn, all that is your craft.’

‘Then I’m sure I’ve read about a case of this before, at some point in our school’s history, attracting the documents from the old dusty shelves within old book logs, that are ripped and tattered,’ said Emmah. ‘Remember that no one is worthless- here, and don’t let others say that you are- definitely the staff, if someone here is doing that come to me about it.’

‘Isn’t that- tattle-telling...?’

‘It is to some...’

Then in another breath, ‘yet not to me at this point, if you are being bullied, and after all, I will not stand for anyone being prosecuted; over no fault of their own.’

‘That is why we started this school in the first place- is it not?’

(And they are all shaking their heads like the little sweet schoolchildren, in their nice, clean, and tidy, pressed schoolchild uniforms, looking far too innocent for their good, some are even popping gum, and kicking their feet under the desks.)

‘And there are such bad kids,’ Emma whispers, in Naddalin’s ear.

‘I know right,’ she said, with a sigh of reliving.

She then went on to say... ‘to have a place for someone like you and me, you all have a home here.’

Later that night, Emmah said, ‘thoughtfully, I thought we got off too easy here.’

‘And their bad girls...?’ Said Emmah.

Naddalin- ‘Ha, now that a joke... he- he- he, they’re just misunderstood, and not even that, there just- Naïve, immature, and juvenile- adolescents for their age.’

Emmah- ‘I’ll look it up for you and see what the past teachers have said about each one and see exactly what happened.’

-And-

‘Yeah, right!’ she- said.’

‘One even gave you her divination already?’

‘Yep...!’

And you just left them to skip off to their rooms, in their new home, feeling loved, is what you did, and

‘you’ll let them won’t you, every day?’

‘Yep...!’ She said back...

‘Then you did your part...’

‘Oh my...’

‘You are not going to believe this, like here it said that one night this girl here: Issy Miralda - she was killed by her daddy... and batten- AND USED.’

‘Why?’

‘She when to a boy’s home, by braking in- ran to his room, and dumped his fake-puss stuff inside her to have his baby... and he had no clue that she was even alive.’ Said Emmah.

(Naddalin- remembering the days of being Nevaeh- it was a fragment in her mind that was still hanging on by a thread, even if heartbreaking.) ‘Sometimes, I wonder if having my thoughts given back is a good thing or if I just going to be even more traumatized.’ She said, tilting her head.

-Yet-

That sound like my own life, I did that...

Oh, seem like moons ago... (sigh) I was hobbled as a small girl by my real mother- I remember being on the top bunk and getting the betting where I was an inch to life, my butt cracked; over nothing, my right ankle; twisted by a boyfriend... so I would not run, yet I did as much as I could, even after.

And just like her with my schooling in class, all the way from 1st up to 12th they had me playing with A B C block's, too, hell all you needed to do with the workbook is trace out the outlined letter of the word like- ball; I understand this girl's life.

I still think about it from time to time, I remember getting the betting with a garden hose, also- my mother physio- sister even tried one cut my citrus off completely by peeing the bed, over being scared and afraid, of life, or the life they gave me.

I EVEN HAD TO BATH WITH HER BOYFRIENDS! Remember have dip spit into my mouth as I was the tobacco Splatoon for his dirty habit, just to see how strong I was, I had to hold it, and swallow, something- I got used to as I got older, with men like this.

So, the first boy to show you some love, yes you want to keep him at all costs, I get it. And then they giggled in my young face and did another line... yet my mother went to my schools saying that I was a vegetable, and the courts were on her side, and she one regardless of how much Hope fought agents what she said, or wanted... I was

branded, just like her as no good within my hometown. Hope took me away, so my mother to my life...

Naddalin- (sigh) 'I feel that maybe things are changing for the better...'

The- words where hardly out of her mouth when the- female - Life Devourer shrieked, wanting death, demise, deceased, expiry, and death- like a victim, therefor Naddalin was a minstrel woman- and at this point was out of the head of her past, and fear of being Nevaeh, nonetheless.

As well as flying into the room, like devil its-self, saying 'this is not over,' and the black girl figure with thin, slight, trivial, and minor character, yet vast in her power, was floating no-less than two inches to

Naddalin's face, looking for a supremacy match.

Naddalin was just ready for the: thing to go away- at this point this was just an everyday! She looked at her fake watch on her wrist, yawned sarcastically- in the blackness of the dark figure that should be a face, saying- 'okay honey- do your 15 minutes, to ruin my day and get on with it so-o I can too.'

...Before she- had finished-d the spell, to sweep her away, she was gone, and looking through the- new glass of the past the sphere slipped to the- tips of her fingers yet she- managed to cling on to it- saying 'yet the still have my nerves do not they, yet they will not get you- well they this time...' and she kissed the crystal ball of her youth and childhood.

Seeing memories play in swirls, like this one playing when she road peddle bikes with the neighbor girl- and remember the first crush at 5, something she had completely forgotten about, yet she had deep feelings for yet was never able to say, over being forbidden- by her- and the Blackbird girls. She saw the first memory ever when she said, to her mother- ‘no she is my girlfriend, and they were holding hands.’

Then again, wasn’t your hometown nothing but trash, red necks, and gripes, all with a confederate flag hang for their dumps of a home, and so red wing, they would rather have shot you then look... did I get that, about right? ...Along with sucking- Christ dick ‘till yah licked ball is, saying you’re going to hell if you don’t have the same beliefs?’ Said Emmah.

‘Yepper pretty much...’ she said back, you got and even I never really saw, this thinking, that this was the way of the entire world.

‘I at times even asked if I was black...’

‘No, you’re whiter than white..., so that can’t be it.’

‘Oh, she- knows how to play, little bitty baby,’ Jenny- said, along with saying look at her babyish, mad eyes staring through the top of her hood all pulled down, of her sweatshirt.’

‘Boo-ooo hoo-ooo!’ cried Jenna.

“Oh, I always know the victim...,’ she remembers I could have you murdered- at my say to final death- at this moment, and no one here would care- BITCH, if your body is eaten by worms, in the graveyard outside.’

Jenny did not say another word and rained off- by the glares- the other girls gave.

’Very well, then- with a name like that- like, I would not talk carp about others... ah- like- the nerve of her.’ Said one of the girls in the group around them.

‘Can we disposal of her?’ Some asked, she- ‘nothing but a slutty bully- she is!’

‘I TOLD YOU, NO!’ Lucius Mallerie roared at the young woman.’

‘Naddalin?’ The girls looked at her all pouting like, with big eyes, and even some with the lip dropped.

‘We can’t stand her!’

‘She is so flipping dumb.’

‘She is not nice to us at all.’

‘She can even read...’

‘She doesn’t need to completely dye, just make her a Re-tard-ed... for us.’

They all agreed unanimously to do so-o.

Then Karly said, overtop all others- ‘I thought she already was...’ and they giggled, like sweet little school’s girls, that they are.

Naddalin’s mind was racing... at the thought of her new powers to kill, with no consequences.

And then returning was- The- Life Devourer, she wanted the dusty spun glass sphere. Yet Naddalin- had no interest in giving it up, without a match of power, streaming like liquid plasma flowing from both of their fingertips, they licked in the energy battle, after a minute or so the back figure had backed down after the stream of power was shorted to the point she would lose and die a final death, feeling sham she vanished into thin dust before their eyes.

~*~

She- just wanted to get them all out of the room alive, to make sure none of her friends paid a terrible price for her stupidity... of not backing down.

And five more moments pass, and it was back... and this time even more ruthless.

The- woman stepped forward, away from the fellow girls, and pulled off her hood, it was you know who in the flash, in an inferno of a whoosh, there were gasps from the others all around, and shrill screams- of saying ‘she is back.’

...It was- Mazel Amsel.

‘All the freaking money in this world will never keep me away from wanting to destroy you!’ she said wickedly.

‘What is your problem?’

‘I do not have one or need one... all I need you to do is question everything- and ask why about noting.’ She rips off in a hast bellowing a-crossed the room.

‘You need more coaxing?’ she- said, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

Very well then you were never the- smallest one,’ she- ordered more Life Devourers to stand beside her- and bring the podium.’

‘Get her,’ she roared, and they did they had Emma restrained...

Let her watch while we torture her like- the little girl and they did they cut her wings off and let them lay there on the floor like a bloody mess...

‘Ha-’ she said in a sick twisted way, I remember doing this to you, yet I am sure if you remember that either- once again you could never retain anything over not being able to handle it.’

‘Don’t you harm her...’ said Naddalin.

‘No- no... simple child, I am not going to your going to do it... to her...’

‘And she pulled out a razor baled and said her cut here’s off... or I will kill your little girlfriend and piss in the ashes.’

‘I’ll do it.’ And she was held by all of them till she did...

...And Emmah screamed.

‘Sorry for this... and she pulled back the hood and made the cut.’ Looked under a trance of power there was no way out, of doing as she asked.

‘Now take her out to the yard and hag her from a tree, in a nose... naked and we can all giggle at the fact that just like you know one cared.’

‘Do not stop there, said Naddalin... just open my mouth and take a shit in it! Why do not yah.’

‘Not a bad idea... once again, do not try to verbalize, you look, dense, dim, dull, obtuse, slow, and most of all stupid.’

Then just like the ghost of McDermott, loomed, to stop all the senselessness of this women’s evil, and at that moment, Naddalin bought bodyguards; so, this would not happen o’er or another time.

McDermott- The hunt of her past, even said ‘I told you to use your new wealth wisely, why didn’t you?’

‘I thought I was...’ she said back.

‘I can only do so-o much...’

Emmah was still outside in -20 hanging from a tree, by a rope in the moonlight. Held feeling half-dead, and sped, and body numb, like complete led, she was

unresponsive, to the other girl's touch, she was lost to them... another loses, for this girl to cope with.

Mazel- 'You will never feel love, or have any happiness, as long as my soul lingers, and if mine no longer lingers, I will see to it that one of my girls- well course you some type of pain and you be left there babbling the question of why- are so sad.'

Then she vanished in a puff of misty dust... in the thin air, she was long gone and nowhere to be found; her job was done...

That night Naddalin, collapsed and was not out of sickbay for 6 months, and did not even care to see anything but her face in a pillow-over grief.

Portion

Naddalin felt- rather close to a new girl named Jill, who came to look after her every day; Naddalin had only had her class for a week yet she had changed lives, within her classroom, she- stepped sideways so that she- was right in front of her even if she would not stop crying to look at her long enough to see that she was there, she- forecast that she would be the next in the line of girls lost to helping her yet, she felt called to do it, and Naddalin feel something in her chest, not a heart, she had not had movement in there for many moons, yet something was defiantly aching.

(Back)

Hervé Barrière had tunneled Dizeryland jail also to face me, in this killing- she is the wicked mastermind, in digging up all the beloved girl's from the school, that have

fallen for the last time that is in the graveyard; out of their resting places and making skull torches with disembodied heads- to flame light the dark creepy, eerie, and spooky, night sky, on twigs from the very, tree around Emmah who was still hang by her nose, but it was alive with a feverish, fanatical glow.

Hervé then thought of all the rotting dead bodies in the large bathtub that all the girls use for their nightly accommodations- before bedtime and lights out, that held them all at once; even the haunts of the room were disturbed and wept.

Nude corpses are floating and bobbing about in the misty stream of the brownish water- a vapor is rising, along with an aroma- that matches- the feeling in the air- of death.

-Then-

‘Anyone that helps this girl, well end up facing death or some torcher in this or that kind way- that I feel fit, you have been warned.’ Her evil voice screeched in their minds.

‘Yah had to smash, this ball thingy that links you to the past, and let it go...’ said Jill, and we already have done that for you, we understand that you need rest.

I did not Jessa did, then she also alleged not stopping in her hyperventilating chatter, like- like un- a-and- if you want her to attack any of us, we were not going to take any chances...’ we were- told this by- Hervé, before they took her away in a patty-wagon pulled by horses down a brick road if we did not- that she would kill us all.

Naddalin did not even blink, and barely got out the words... ‘very well then.’
In her weekend state, and in her ability to speak.

As far as Hervé goes, they finally get her on a-a steam train (it was a fight-yah know) like- in barred box care, and such- to take her back to the jail, in which she escaped from, and- and- like- it was quite the journey for her to get here, and- and- a-like double, the time and funding to get her back.’ She said this in a childlike modulation or inflection of the voice.

She- did not even move; she- the young foolish girl merely stared at her longing for words- yet none came, the- tip of her tongue moistening the lips of her mouth, yet she finally said; ‘I do not think your boss will be too pleased with us if you come back without it, will she?’

Naddalin did not even grunt... and the child said ‘well, I must go... I am late for class now...’

‘One more- I am going to be- like a penny, two-faced and worth nothing!’ Said Naddalin.

Portion

(One year has passed)

‘So,’ said Naddalin, along with saying sheepishly... ‘um- what kind of prophecy are we talking about, anyway, in this so-called ball, all her memories were

whipped away, and she had become a sad, and lonely lost soul of a fallen angel, without a friend in either world.’’

She- could not think what to do but to keep talking and babbling about nothing. Neville’s arm was pressed against her, and she- could feel her shaking- her condition had worsened- she was deteriorating away; and imprudent at this point to even fight. They have made her out to be as they say, yet once more.

She- could always feel one- girls lingering souls with quickened breath on her, as if on the back of her head, down her neck, and along with the spin of her back. Hitherto, she could not remember why- about that either; yet she always felt as if someone were creeping over her. Yet she did not seem to mind.

Because- her mind was blank. She was hoping they were all thinking hard about ways to get her out of the state of mind that she was in and that someone had already formed an expert plan.

And that master plain lied with Emmah, in the ground, she kept all that was Nevaeh’s and now what was Naddalin’s life too- lost deep within her mind, that even in death could be retrieved- yet only she was that smart yet to remember something a clever, keen, ingenious, and nifty as that.

Yet she had to keep them out of her mind to get what she needed- and with no one to trust, she was stumped.

‘What kind of prophecy would she keep for me?’ Mumble Naddalin, still loopy, silly, and mindless.

(In a moment of thinking back and going back in time)

‘Prophecy-’ repeated Hervé- when she was being drugged away, her- grin fading from her face, think that her job was not done as asked, and the family, that she was under- you know who- and they would make sure that she would never become exposed again, for leaving behind something for Naddalin.’

And then it hit her, when she remembered, after, being reminded, by Jill, that she was paying for everything in Emmah’s life, even final death- ‘it was love after all,’ she always said.

Recalling back when- Emmah had picked out a tombstone, that was her, in stone also holding a crystal ball, ‘Prophecy-’ seen within her mind; the real crystal ball, lays with her, and it been out in the open for a year now, and no one ever knew, glistening in the duck sun-light was the real ball holding all that was her life, it was pulled down from her praying hands... and her life and past lives were restored- in a magical moment.

Neville- came to me saying this... I had this dream, to get this from your room, and change it out, with a fake... It was not a dream, over the face, that I did yet do not remember- why I did- a total out of body expressive, as if Emmah soul were with-in me, mind, body, and soul.

Like... we could not believe that she would do this, yet it was in McDermott, Last Will, and Testament, that the next of kin would oversee finances, and that was Emmah, and all things lost in time and the past. ‘To remember all things past.’

Her headstone read- 'Do not wait for life. Do not long for it. Be aware, always and at every moment, that the miracle is in the here and now.'

...And it was!

Just like the days, that passed just like a photo- that would fade over time marked the moment, from an old-school shutter camera, that would be left to become lost in that, even when in development, with a new time to be relevant or not in the given time.

Portion

'Nope, not joking I am the most powerful- in the world not once more- and I always was, yet did not see what was right in front of me over wanting to see nothing but glum and darkness- and be lost in the dealing of self-heating,' said Naddalin- to Jill, her eyes focused now on all the Life Devourer gathering around her, to take away yet once more she was rain over more powerful- than any other in this land and even world.

Neville- looked and said, 'this doesn't bring her back though, does it?'

'Oh, yes but it can,' Naddalin placed the heart-shaped key, that she wore around her neck, in both of her lives in the hands of her statue, that marked her grave, and miraculously the stone begins to crumble- with magical rays of light, and resurrected first the haunted torched soul and then the sinless wholesome body formed around, like a new nude born young woman in a pink blanky of the age of 5, was young, sweet, and completely innocent Emmah, now held in Naddalin's arms, to keep under her wings, and to say she is her child as if she was her mother.

Giving her new life, in a past life... some of the girls questioned and did not get either, yet we had her back- and that was all that mattered. All the girls loved being little mommy with her, saying over and over how cute she is...

(Yet back to that moment)

They were looking for a weak link as to why she came back so young to them- yet there was no time to think about that, and space through which they could escape- aroused, and all the girls ran- even Naddalin with toddler Emmah still in her hands.'

'We know that we- like us girls all could do a spell to make her, like her real age...'

(They spoke up)

'...Yet, we feel not too... we love her as is...' they all said sweetly and unanimously...

And Naddalin was more than okay with this, she got what she wanted, and in a way deep down even without ever saying that she did be someone to love, keep, hold in a hug, and treasure.

'Odd, they were dating before,' said one...

Yes, but a year can feel like a lifetime without, so she is happy with what was meant to be at this moment- she is lost in her eyes and love- with her new reason to live.

Portion

(In chatter among some of the girls)

How come Ava wants it she should have been the life brought back now?’

‘Some things in this world are mysterious.’ Said Emmah was barely able to get it all out.

‘Maybe Someone was praying for me’ Naddalin said being from ear to ear with her baby wrapped around her, talking in baby talk to her...

Jill- ‘that in the coinage to keep her dead... and away...’

Feeling defeat, and retreat, at once several of the- Death Devourers let out low theories- of why they no longer need to be there in screams- of torcher and terror, thought open windows and doors; and even though the walls themselves- they fled.

‘Yeah,’ said Naddalin, maintaining her tight grip on the- glass ball- saying I must hide this- yet they can see everything, even in my mind so how? So-o, expecting another attempt of them to bewitch it from her.’

‘Don’t waste your time, I sure they know by now, your plan before you do.’ She spoke.

‘You dare not speak her name- ever again, or she will come back- we shall not.’ whispered young Emmah.

No that is the last time, that can happen said... Emmah, or I- we dye for- a final time.

‘Yeah, I have no problem with saying- this pig of a woman’s name along with her precious piglets, or their now pigtailed fake hero- that they charmed, and as far as the girls they are still milking from momma and flowing the leader!’

‘Shut your mouth!’ Naddalin Emmah cried, saying I am serious.’

‘Someone needs a nap and a bottle...’

Naddalin, I not shitting pissing with you, for the love of Christ- and the dark-God’s too, do not think you are out of the woods yet. Do not mock me or the fact you have me back- and them away for a short while they are going to rain piss on you as you have never seen, you are never going to be invisible.’

‘You dare speak her name with your undeserving lips, you dare slander my life now that I am your half-bloods and have an idiom- that I need to hide from you, you dare... not treat me this way, as if I am your little girl, if not for me you would not be here.’

‘don’t you know I am now half-blood too- and to her and those girls I should not be here?’

‘Blood is everything in this world of how you are going to be, and what you’re not, I am not happy, it was for you, so remember that...’ she said in baby babble.

Naddalin- 'I cannot love if you're a child, think about how that would look, if your now part of me too.' Said Naddalin inconsiderately.

Emmah gave a little moan in her ear and fell fast asleep in her potting.

'Ava...?' She thought, I remember not to say it and she rolled her eyes, at the girl in her arms... knowing that she would a lest rising her, even if she were not okay with it, she would come around.

Rocking with her in her arms, she was sleeping hard, she did not hear this... but... she said, 'Yeah, your mother was a necromancer- and fallen as well- I remember, but your dad was a non-magical person, never part of this world,' she whispered along with say... 'ever- and never- knowing, don't believe what I am been telling you... you should and she tapped her on her little sweet nose, un-pure blood is running through you, I think not- a little girl, if anything now with me- you have it all and everything you need- you need not worry, sleep peacefully?'

Portion

Now in the room where other glass crystals are stored, Naddalin placed hers to hopefully get lost in time.

And then if now time to was she appeared, she being AVA herself before you could think, and before she could blink, a jet of inflamed red light had shot from the- end of her magical wand, but Mallerie had deflected it, slightly it was meant to hit Naddalin, yet it did not; the spell caused her to hit the roof and afoot to the- left of Naddalin and several of the- glass orbs- with past life memories were shattered- and lost to time.

‘ATTACK! WE NEED THE VISIONS- TO STAY SAFE, FOR EMMAH!’

Two figures, pearly white as ghosts, fluid as smoke, unfolded themselves from the- fragments of broken glass upon the- floor and each began to express; their voices- and the life they had inside competed so that only fragments of what they were saying could be heard over Mallerie and AVA’s shouts- when they thought they were more important to be heard.

Then the other girls appeared, from the grave, and the fight was on, just as Emmah said, in the room of crystal, flashes of light, and power steams everywhere, a fight ‘till death, for the girls that are the liven dead, that want to bring final death to their enemies.

‘... At the- solstice will come a new one... if for them, after praying for one too the dark Gods, lower down- in this world.’

Little Emmah was in the girl’s room, sucking her two middle fingers, asleep where she was oh-so-o variable... at this point with no one around to protect her, even if the large arched wood door was locked, with a skeleton key in the girl’s chambers of dorm rooms, and bunks in a row.

And then Ava is there standing over young Emmah bed, with wicked thoughts, running through her head; ‘she- dared the- dares’ shrieked incoherently, she thought of all the things she wanted to do all at once, all the opinions rushing so fast she did not go about doing one of them, to this little girl, she- stands their saying ‘filthy half-blood.’

And the door flew open, and the attacks took place, as the child napped, though it was an all-in-a piece that was priceless on her sweet innocent little face.

We well WAIT UNTIL WE'VE GOT her- PROPHECY crystal ball- in our hands before we kill her in front of your eyes!'

She is going to kill her- bawled Mallerie, too Naddalin, I have the child, she said, and she is going to leave now. It was odd she was quiet and even came about saying it.

All right I well, I let you keep her for some time and then make it even harder for you to let go.

'... And then I will come after...' you and her too... and I will take her from you in a way that you could not even horror over in your darkest, deepest, dim, and gloomiest state of mind- that you would struggle to think of.' Said the- figure of a young woman, that she was, yet not the one that was remembered as the why she looked off the past, Ava did not look like the girl Naddalin remember from the past looking back into the past remembrances of Nevaeh, who was deep in her, mind... yes taking Emmah when she becomes older and you are attached she said, would become that one is more tragic, heartbreaking, and demonic, lose to you, that she might be the end, of your dimwitted mind at last. And I will rip this child's head off- before that claw out her eyes- so she cannot see, before you and all the girls in these schools.

'I could do that now...' she said evilly.

And from that point on young Emmah had to live the life of a girl that could not see the world, she was part of, no way to see all that was wounded.

Emmah would be helpless... from this day on. Her blue eyes left in a jar give back to steam mad Naddalin, with giggles.

They rushed Emmah to the infirmary, yet there was nothing they could do, no magic, no potion, no surgery, she would like the rest of her days as a blind girl. Her eyelids closed permanently. Yet from that day, she became into playing the grand piano- and spent many hours in front of it, and this went on for years. Emmah became an expert and 12 even writing her pieces.

She did all her tasks on her own, yet magic and flying were- out... she was gifted now. And did not take life this way well for a year...

She was so wanting to be like the other, yet they were afraid of her... she became lost in being alone, and only trusting Naddalin, whom she only knew from voice, touch, and sent, and was very clingy.

Then at that moment at that time, it was as if the ball melted into thin air, at this point in her- figures of hers; not bursting or- devastated sphere in any way, go to another world a place they would never- ever know where it was; only Naddalin- remembering a place that she walked a day in and day out, where there were linked ribbons of still, that sway in the wind, of high heights- that hunt like the ghost of the past- even in her loss of a mind- and the regain and the loss yet o'er, underneath one of the foundations, marked by a missing bracket, it would rest, eight feet under.

They would never- ever, even think of looking there... and to top that fact, they were not even part of the Earthy world any longer- (you know who, her them, she, and it too...) ...and were unlikely to be for years to come. It was an articulated plain, it was.

Nevaeh had nothing liked to them that reminded them of the past places they loved as a teen girl.

There was not even a while blow- next to her old homes but fragments left even if she knew yet that did not, the memories have been altered, to the mind that where linked agent her wishes.

Teleported in space and time, the ball of mind was transported, locking out bits of life of all things past, and haunting, to remember yet should be remembered, over the fact it was her life.

The- problem was going to be conveying it to someone over on the other side not to ask questions, just bury it and ensure the- others would never know. And That fall on Dariez, who she felt she could trust, that lived by the tracks. And her every move was graded over by Naddalin's soul of mind within her body- and thought the girls very eyes.

Another reason, Emmah- was stabbed out, so the only way Emmah could see the world was thought others, yet they knew that it was only ever going to be thought Naddalin eyes, in glitch, and lack of everything- of her body, mind, etc., or so they thought.

It would just be another link for them to see into minds- from other minds and eyes, to use in evil... and Naddalin love and pleads from Emmah would never let this girl see out her eyes, or another girl in the world- why so-o they could control what she saw to relay back to them, and take her away or use agent her, and she too alike.

‘A world of darkness is better than a world of seeing nothing but pain when in this darkness your life, is- the love, I have for you.’ She said to her.

Yet, Emmah was contrary... yet empathetic.

Then the window glass smashed, shattered, and flew onto and upon the- floor from her screams of defeat trying to live life like the other girls, she cried nonstop and lost herself reading books in braille.

They had, however, given Naddalin an idea, that this girl could read all the books in both worlds, and they both could become geniuses in their wealth of knowledge, even being unlike the rest in the world they would know more just in a unique way, both girls feel the same way they were not dumb in a way they just need to learn in a way that worked for their disadvantages in live others gave to them.

One book after another- another...

Emmah- ‘You haven’t told me what’s so special about the insight I’m supposed to be hand over to you, and not for me... to have a life, after all of this is for your gain and my loss after all,’ she- said to Naddalin, Emmah was playing as a child all time- or reading or playing musical instruments, with the younger first graders, even if at

this time she was in her now teen years, they had her graded back to below elementary, in interactions.'

(Back)

Naddalin- She was hoping that worked that everything they were fighting over moved to the other world without shattering like her on the inside, she- moved her foot slightly sideways, feeling around for someone else's.

(Forward)

On top of all that she was hurt also over the fact that Emmah was starting to heather like a teen girl to a mother that was saying no too many times.

'Do not play games with us, Emmah,' said Mallerie, and Naddalin winked at the girls and moved her lips without speaking, saying thank you!

All Emmah needed was a friend.

'I'm not playing games that I cannot see or trust what you're going to do with me,' said Emmah, half her mind on the- conversation, half of the wand that was laying on the foot of her bed that she felt she would never use again. That the magical world was over for her... (little did she know.)

And then she- found someone's toes they were Mallerie's and pressed down upon them, Emmah was saying teach me to trust you, with a sharp intake of breath the girl said 'ouch' she told her you can trust me with your life, and music started saying one way to trust me fast is to learn how to dance, and the music started. And then stepped in

something she never felt before- it was a boy, little did Emmah see they had her ready for the formal, he said ‘time for a night of fun, no exceptions.’ She said yes... in tears... (yet she did not even know his name she felt safe in his arms.) ‘Mallerie’s is a girl, that I feel is going to be a good girlfriend to you,’ said Naddalin, ‘have fun!’

Naddalin- ‘...And let you miss the biggest event of the year? No...’

Emmah did not say a word, she got dressed in a gown, and when on her date as if she was not blind- or left behind in any way.

(Back)

Naddalin- She was hoping that worked that everything they were fighting over moved to the other world without shattering like her on the inside, she- moved her foot slightly sideways, feeling around for glass shard in the darkroom after all the lights had mysteriously all blown out- to pitch black.

(Forward- later that night)

On top of all that she was hurt also by the fact that Emmah was starting to hate her like a teen girl to a mother that was saying no too many times.

‘Do not play games with us, Emmah,’ said Mallerie, and Naddalin winked at the girls and moved her lips without speaking, saying thank you!

All Emmah needed was a friend.

‘I’m not playing games that I cannot see or trust what you’re going to do with me,’ said Emmah, half her mind on the- conversation, half of the wand that was laying on the foot of her bed that she felt she would never use again. That the magical world was over for her... (little did she know.)

And then she- found someone’s toes they were Mallerie’s and pressed down upon them, Emmah was saying teach me to trust you, with a sharp intake of breath the girl said ‘ouch’ she told her you can trust me with your life, and music started, saying one way to trust me fast is to learn how to dance, and the music underway.

And then stepped in was something she never felt before- it was a boy, little did Emmah see they had her ready for the formal, he said ‘time for a night of fun, no exceptions, you’re going!’ She said yes... in tears... (yet she did not even know his name she felt safe in his arms- as if she had known him all her life.)

Naddalin- ‘Mallerie’s is a girl, that I feel is going to be a good girlfriend to you,’ said Naddalin, ‘have fun!’

‘Okay...?’

‘...And let you miss the biggest event of the year? No...’

Emmah did not say a word, she got dressed in a gown helped by Mallerie’s, and when on her date as if she was not blind- or left behind in any way.

‘What just happened?’ she would- whispered.

‘You’re going to party like a girl your age tonight, and I going to make sure you remember who you are.’

‘I know you?’ She said yet could not put her finger on it.

I know you know me! He spoke.

‘Duerre never told me that you were so beautiful- you are...

And she turns to him and said even if these...

And she pointed to her eyes...

‘You accept that they tightly shut forever- never blinking or open- to look at you admiringly, no eyes lie hidden behind the lids or a link to the- entrails of my soul?’ She spoke.

‘Eyes or not it does not change who you are to me- inside you’re the same, and on the out, it just looks as if you’re asleep all the time, it’s not a sad thing.’ He said reluctantly.

Mallerie sneered at him... in the carriage that was taking them to the grand ballroom, with all the other teens.

‘What?’ Said Naddalin, looking into the night, thought Mallerie mind, if he hurts her, I will kill him.

She was passing the floor.

And for a moment she- quite forgot the plain of her life that she was given. Yet I think that Naddalin had something to do with that...

‘What about my eyes?’ She insisted.

‘Let us forget about them all.’ He spoke.

‘What do you think?’ Whispered Emmah more urgently behind his ear, feeling his face to do so.

‘Your younger, and unhappy that all that changed about you’ he said.

‘You would be too if you were me, and had no choice but to live this way, just to be used.’

‘I- do- feel- I know you...’ she said.

‘I know that you do... yet I am not telling you, to see if you realize.’ And his voice trails off...

‘Can she be?’ Said Mallerie is remembering her old life, she is falling in love. Sounding maliciously delighted; some of the- bereavement and death of a past life is what she needs, to get him back as if it were all meant to be-in this one.

Naddalin knew before the night was over it would end with Emmah on her back in soft warm pesante, love! Love so soft she could not even get, and her morning of perfect even in her darkness, and when she did go it would be like geysers, on repeat, sparing so heart it would hit her 11-year-old feet.

Naddalin knew that the girl needed to feel human, if only for a little, with darling, tenderness, feelings of want, while even if in this world you could be no less than that. Yet she is still a girl at heart even if it stopped years ago. Emmah was going to get back her glow, of the girl they used to know. The night of a lifetime- Naddalin knew, yet that what all girl weighs a lifetime for, one night to hold onto for a lifetime or even more.

Emmah was having the time of her life... and was swooned over like never, by this hot sexy man, she only had pictured in her mind- that she knew all too well. She let go and started to trust, releasing all the pain of the past.

Yet like her, do you know who he was now of blacked-out lust, or can you picture him, and what he is doing to her?

Like most girls Emmah loved to make cummie, she spent most of her day doing that, and he was her fantasy come true for her dreams of pleasuring herself.

There is no modesty in the fallen angel world, everything is public records- for anyone to read back, every moment of a fallen angel's life is automatically transcribed by magic into the book of their life and even lives.

Portion

(Amassment)

'I just got a new message, a high school in Pennsylvania was shot up last night and there was yet another spray for fame, and we now have a whole new batch of girls coming, all 9th graders, that were shot down in their schools- well just trying to learn-

what they're given to learn, in class, by a girl- that was a drop out that was picked on by those girls, that is why they're here, after all, never less the shooter is now in HELL, and we have 19 new kids to add, to this grade, ...yet anyways we have a new train coming in momentarily ladies, be nice to them, they have been through a lot, as you could imagine.'

One girl named: Angela spooks up in the back well sitting in her desk, that is a link to the one in front- 'What is it going to take before the U.S.A changes laws about having an AK-47's, and child has the rights to them?'

Then at that moment, the girl relaying the message left...

A room busting out in the next giggling...

Some of laughing to the point it was disturbing- to Naddalin, and some even undercover their faces from their books were lost in the madness and more laughter- in their twisted thoughts, Naddalin shades her eyes and took Emmah into the next room, the laughter in her ears was 10 times stronger, and more appalling. What could be funny?

Jo-Ann- 'And they're still going to the place that is next to hell, after living one.' Naddalin was moving her lips as little as possible, 'smashed as tight as they could be together, she said- 'these are -lives?''

'Duerre never told you, girls, that here you get the chance to start over and go back as a new, in another body?'

Mallerie repeated, saying yes, and if not, you can be that haunt in someone that can only see and hear you, only she knows you are in here, yet your all she has- all in her mind to keep going.'

'It's wonderful...' Duerre said, along with saying- '...to be someone that a girl learns to trust in her mind, as you take over her body and soul. And then you are all she has in life, till you take it and bring her back with you, and she FALLS TOO YOU!'

Rushing to the station was the train- the doors were opened by the conductor, they ran off in ghostly looking binges that were nothing but flooding soul above the ground, till they got their full impressions body's back.

One of the new girls said, walking naked as the day she, like them, were born, head hung low, and body trembling, it was asked borough of a magic team of girls, that was standing before them, as they were all in a line, and asked why they were here- and why they should be, asked in a way like a warden at a prison would.

One young stark-naked girl looks- holds up her weak hand in fear, tearing up saying, 'you should know,' along with saying jittery- 'The world is a toile, a freaking cesspool, in which we have to live with the only rights being to eat whatever we want bombing around within it- and all and everything is like is a free game of skill, and that is why we're here.'

The did not say a word, they just motioned, them along... as they marched to the shower room, and disaffected- link into their newfound bodies of this world- as the fallen, then marched bare through all and every hall, for all the girls too see them- and

eye them up-and, take bets on whom would cry like a little girl, all night long about missing mommy and daddy; like- we have all be though this is part of the initiation. As they go to their new dormitories, they ask to -remember- why they are here and not there.

Well, she explains why you did not come earlier, the- Dark Lord wondered why, you have a new life given, when not worthy, to you young ladies- that have no ruling, that death to you was unfair- he is a forgiven

Lord that you will serve, that is why you are here.’ ‘And... if- we don’t?’
Blink- blink- blink!

‘Then you can go to HELL!’ Said the girl leading the lineup.

Where are we now- it is like Hells Purgatory, where you are an angle of the fallen with dark wings and powers if you are worthy.

‘When will we?’ She asked.

Some of the girls just like she- thought natural curiosity about what would make her want to her if to pray to a Dark Lord- exactly wording the if and why... if she did, questioning everything, she chooses not to think, she went along with the meditation idea of having a life.

‘You didn’t come running when she- showed you the- place where it was hidden in your dreams, that this place was real did she?’

The other girls said, all in diverse ways ‘you lost me...’

The night before, I died... did she (she pointed at Naddalin,) I saw you in my dream a girl named, Nevaeh- saying it over and over that is you, I know it, along with saying that she said in the dream, 'don't go to school- tomorrow repeatedly.' Like a premonition. 'Did she know?' said Naddalin, 'well I can say that to you, I was the girl in your dreams, and I said not to go, then why did you?'

Behind her, she- felt a rush of frigid air, then heard Emmah passing the message- to the- others of a chilling massacre on Earth, that there was more gun violence- not more than a week later- 1st graders even, and that more girls were coming in- enough to make a new grade. And the shooter, a seventh-grade boy, all he gets is a lasting life in HELL.

It was a horrific sight for all the mothers and fathers to come in and see brain splatter all over the young classroom and must see them in a coffin for the last time no more than two days later.

And she- thought to keep talking, to distract the other yet they were not giggling this time, they were mortified.

'Why?' Mallerie sounded incredulously undelighted.'

Why?'

'So, she- wanted me to get them, did she, the same girl that got me- and they to...' the new girl yelled? Not yet understand the ways of the world she was in yet, she was blaming Naddalin for being the angel of death.

Because she was not the only individual who was permitted to retrieve a prophecy from their dreams that night.

The- Department of Mysteries, are holding a meeting in the auditorium, for all of you newcomers... about the ways of your new world, and your new-found life, and body, and those who are to come, and how to act, think, and react to them and all the other.

This was not a plan- by the girl you saw in your dreams some of you- she was trying to keep you from death and was not made by us. (The faces skeptical,) it was the act of a person taking life on Earth... yet we as the mysterious world let it be, order by the Dark Lord, saying well take the lives. That is how it works here...

Backtalk and more backtalk the girl gave- like a smart ass that she was, without her being allowed to speak in the room, finally; as the-Dark Lord rushed no less than two inches from her face discovered, by all for the first time, looking more demonic than anything they had ever seen, when she- attempting to yell.

He was saying something like- 'I have no choice... here' He obliterated her to dust before their eyes, to the world of flames below, for being belligerent, quarrelsome, argumentative, cantankerous, and loud-mouthed.

NADDALIN- he said- wickedly...

'About both of you, the girl you are and the girl that is lost inside you, about both of you...'

‘I’ll protect- and what lies inside you, over the fact I have too- and I was paid off but remember that- I well- yet not by choice do I want to, yet I well, for now.’ He said in an unsettling way. Then it said-

‘You will not be taking any more blame for wrath...’

‘And why did she- want to steal a prophecy about me? Why would I take blame anyways to girls that do not know me...?’ She spoke.

After the assembly, all the girls were sitting in their room gathered around Naddalin, it was time for them to ask their questions.

‘This was the same prophecy idea... is it not?’ Said Avril.

‘Haven’t, you ever wondered why the- she tried to kill you as a baby?’

‘I wounded a lot of things as to the why of it all...’ Whispered Naddalin.

‘Why did she not kill you then?’ asked Avril.

‘To feel as much pain as one could that’s why.’

SICK! Said Avril, along saying- I want a copy of your book, to understand this world, I need to know all about the girl, that came here and then existed on- in this world and Earthly too.

Naddalin stared into the- slatted eye holes, of Emmah, remembering the grey eyes that were gleaming in the young lady’s body that were lost to the Dark Lord’s wishes, saying can we take these eyes and place them in here?

‘It would be a miracle if I could make the blind see...’

Naddalin placed her hands over Emmah’s eyes and full face- in healing touch, and supernaturally the eyeballs in the glittering gray were placed inside her eye socket, crying, and coming out of a blurriness the girl could see again miraculously.

Saying- ‘this was all meant to be...’ She screams...

Portion

In the last 5 years, she has released herself in the dark, 9,125 times, with him. It was time that she got pregnant with him- the only way she knew him was in her mind- in him coming out of her within moments of her body, and now for the first time, the mind that was in her, was seeing him and he was seeing more than just into her.

Was she prophesies, finally coming back to her in the good? She is- repaired Naddalin’s fathers had died, so a young child could live. She was- repair too mind, body, and spirit also... and for one she was able to think easy. And let her guard down, and for the first time she was able to go out and soar in flight and take off like a hand glider running off the side of a 1,000 Foothill. The rush of when passing her by at a high rate of speed, it was exciting, she screeched until it reverberated in the tree-filled hills around, that was covered in a low fog.

Emmah carried, saying ‘I can see and have the love of my life all in the same day, and remember why you were my best friend? ...And you are Naddalin...’

Was the- answer always held in her hands?

She thought back, thinking yes, yes it was.

Oh, the baby girl that Emmah had was one down Earth that did not live more than 48 hours (about 2 days), as a sold with a newborn child was passed to Emmah long for a child of her own, to mother. She gave her life up, and she can have it back and have a family and look after a young child, as I did her. I just thought you would like to know...

Long story, short ending here, Emmah's daddy was a moonshiner... and he was always in the woods, or on the run... and was in and out of the clink, just to keep food on the table. And Kristopher was the first boy she ran to that said I love you back.

Emmah had a flashback in her mind that I was looking in to distorted- and pulling frames of colors like a movie, of being 5 or so seeing the flames of the still. Yet that is the life of a hillbilly. And she is proud to be one...

Timeout in flight looking in the other worlds around that belong in time and space, that is no longer our time and space or even place. We angels are looking down on the Earth over Washington DC. We see 7,000 pairs of shoes outside the US Capitol, now half of those soles are with us, the question is why? We well remember silent footsteps to end kid valance.

(I thought)

It is so sweet to see a girl must pay here due to the paper, as they say now have her, way as she always wanted to, along, yet that is a girl's life, isn't it? They were just infatuated with each other. It was cousin love, all the way back until they were like 10,

Emmah was in troubling love with this boy for yes till it made her hate him over it, but she was always in love with him and fantasized about him all ways day and night, wishing to have love with him and hold him tightly.

They would spend holidays at each-others homes- defining the parents, and he would say in the girl's room, the other girls would be out and they would talk all night with her nestled up to him, and then the summers came and it turns into a wrong love where they did not care, that he kept it in the family or what daddy said anymore, she wanted him, yet she was a fool, so many times this was wrong that she gave him up, and she paused, and she could not see that she after a while was killing herself over it all, and now she has him. It is a cousin love and now looking at them making love who cares, love is love- right? I have all the memory they would play, run, jump, and even night swim... they were kids in love and lusting over being in love... walks in the wood... you get it.

Emmah- I could see for the first time, I stared at him. Who was this man? Was he truly the one that I had fallen in love with? This man was the father of the child that I would bear. It was more than I could comprehend. I opened my eyes. We were driving through the past, and I remember all the childhood games we played; I was at last with him. How could he make her feel this way after everything that had happened? She should be mad as hell at him; instead, here she was, her pussy dripping wet. She blushed, and a soft whimper escaped her.

That sexy little sound almost drove him mad, of her- like it did when it was a wrong cousin love- back when they were children. He turned her around in one

instantaneous movement, his large hand encircled her long slender neck, her big eyes staring up at him, and her soft rosebud lips slightly parted. He lowered his head and took her mouth in a hard-demanding kiss, sinking his tongue deep into her mouth and feasting.

When he lifted his head, she was gasping for air; and her breath came into soft little pants. He looked at her, a serious, emotionless look on his face. As if to prove his point, he turned her around, he reached down between her legs and plunged two fingers deep inside her tight, now-swollen pussy.

She remembers when they were just kids... and it was all the same now... She looked at him and he had this possessive look on his face that both scared, confused, and excited her at the same time. Feeling trapped and vulnerable, she began to struggle against his hold. But he was much stronger, and he would not budge, they made love even if it were wrong. A glowing smile played across her face as memories of the night before rushed back, everything was the same as it was in that loss of innocent days when they were kids when they talked about everything and nothing at all, all at the same time. What scared her most was that she enjoyed it. It did turn the heat up in the bedroom as well, made the sex even hotter. She did love the new side of her cousin, more than she wanted to admit. Was what she needed all along, she thought to herself- and then she sighed and now- that the answer was yes all along.

She remembers- when he said, "You smell so good," he breathed into her neck. Cuddled on the sofa when they were kids, letting your hair down on his face she was on top of him, all the flashbacks were coming back to her as was c*mming.

With that he firmly grasped a handful of curls, she lowered her legs, nothing changed. Her legs were weak and shaking, she leaned against the dresser for support, her breast heaved as her breath came in tiny little pants, her eyes widen as he lifts his fingers to his mouth and sucked them dry. Yet my thoughts of all those years took me into the darkness of all the pain I had to go through just to have him back to me.

Naddalin- I stood up abruptly, slamming my hands on the table, causing the lamp to wobble and flicker, the day and time hand come... A half-an-hour later, the train rumbled to a stop, and everybody started getting off at that was the last time I saw her she and he were off to start a new life, in the town.

My job looking over her was over, in her time of hurt- and loss, yet I got everything she sought, over her saving me in every way that I could be saved. And there is in the empty room was she stayed dim light, with nothing but an old dusty piano eerily showing in the sun rays of a daking day in my world of coding and dying, to remind me that she is going. My mind flashed back to that time. There was red blood stretched down the halls coming out of that room as if it were like this in darkness.

Dark laughter flooded with the blood of her having her eye stabbed out, from the room down the hall, I still ask why. It is like I have a calling to help but to me, after the fact, it seems pointless. Or I have to say was it all meant to be, anymore I do not know... do you? I left her alone like before, yet I must ask with all the money in the world am I happy... I do not know... if I am lonely I think I would like to be let alone, were in my mind could be free, to be the genius that I am- that the new-and why I was

made to be left behind- I have the I.Q of 175- not 75 as they said they just drop the one to take me out the same as them- over the fact I could not be more- you see- you see.

Portion

Three weeks later, I dragged her body out of the woods I chased all around and down, ripping all the clothing that was on her body off, and fractured her sweet young head with a stone. Cutting off her had I lost mine in the passion of love that was hate. In a field of wheat and settled it in the epicenter of a circle of chippings, like a shrine of a fiery Hell- lost in the purgatory 'till final death, I said the last prayer in chants that you would not understand with white eyes rolling back into my head, to the Dark Lords, to understand the loss of life... that I was taking, back. I had positioned there with my other friend, Emmah- that gave me my life back, yet, I was lost without her, and she did not want me so-o I had to-it was temporary insanity. I knifed her more than twice, yet this time in a way that was not in love, it was across the throat, and fifty-five times in the chest, even if there was no heart beating, I felt like mine was, and it stopped. I was planning to douse her body with acid disabled, keep the eyes in a jar, keep a lock of hair, and placed her back in the graveyard- where I could love her and cry over the grave or loss- like a good little girl I am, if I can have her in my life then she need not be alive for someone to use her, but something went mistaken, and we took off instead... as just a transparent soul, and I am sure not she be coming back to mine and body.

‘It’s not cool- to betray your girlfriend...’

P.S it was said by others in school that Jenny has Afrappgia, either way, she is sped.

Interval: 4

Emanon

There was a voice in all their heads saying- 'The annual slaying of children under the age of ten, is up and you or someone you know will be killed for our Gods, don't fear, you will linger in the prophecies.' You well all be marched around bare in the ceremony and disassembled, and your blood give back to the dark lord, we been doing this for centuries, as barbaric as we do not stay from traditions, 100 young ladies' tonight well see there last day with us... sleep well girls, the blood runs over the graveyard like a red river to keep the dark magic real- and lasting.

A lot of the girls were thinking that they were going to die virgins, there were cries all around, about not ever finding one, and even thinking about schoolwork of all things, in the moments of their last hours, or what could be. Dr. Mccune said as they were marking around in the nude for his examinations- 'You're a strong independent woman, you don't need some man to slop and flop on you!'

One girl asked- 'like- how do you fail an examination like this, when it's nothing but slaughter the youth?' Dr. Mccune- He tapped Sam on the chest and made an x on her hand saying- 'you're up for final death.' Sam was one of the new girls who were not even there a week, and already she was up for more death than what she had already faced.

...And then there was Naddalin lost in a trance- in all the commotions, lots in her thoughts a million miles away- or so it seemed. ‘Someone made a prophecy about Ava And me?’ she muttered. That is what brought this to mind... remembering that their life would linger in a crystal ball.

she said quietly, gazing at Lucius Mallerie, her fingers tightening over the- warm glass sphere in her hands. It was hardly larger than a Snitch and still gritty with dust, she was looking back on a life that she now did not understand.

Even though all that, and the young girls running about losing their minds, she made young girl Sam, come, and get it for her, to look inside over the fact her eyesight was not what it used to be now aging 20 years or so-o, she looked around and said- ‘nothing here really changes- just the faces and the names, yet it, all the same, all the same.’

‘Why couldn’t she- get it yourself?’ Some whispered.

Old and crazy... they said, along with saying- ‘and to think she was a teacher here.’

‘Get it for her she has more money than God!’ said Emma, who was not liking the comments, and the age of 33 or so-o. As far as Nevaeh inside Naddalin, she lost count of age, it was just a number and like life to her at this point, it did not matter, a cackle of mad laughter over she whispers- to the children, that was not even listening to her, and her wisdom.

~*~

The- Dark Lord, walk into the- Bureau of Magic when they are so sweetly ignoring his return to power over Naddalin, and even the girls, and the mother too. Yet, Naddalin is still lost in her mind of defeated to realize, the war may be over... even though thought hunting thoughts of the girls linger in the shared mind of Nevaeh forever, and cannot be suppressed, she feels that she will never be whole again...

The- Dark Lord, reveal herself in a transformation, of all the killing of the young girls to make her new and evil wicked body assemble- of being Mazel, and the war has just begone!

Portion

‘Very good, particularly good...’ said Mallerie just to mount on a flying horse, to spread the word of all the stuttering.’ You are wasting their time with my dear cousin, they no longer care to know, it not humane to them, like they have all going soft- in this mysterious world?’

Naddalin- Nonetheless, the- Dark Lord knows you are not united- ‘NOW!’ yelled Naddalin you must make your presence known as always- don’t you? And put fear into all the minds around the land!

The bullets fly past them- from the Dark- Lord's military, along with a blast of the hunting horns, marking all the death of the youth, that was taken so they all go could keep thriving...

‘So, she has you doing the dirty work for her, as always-?’ Said Naddalin, looking over the mass graves and the hooded beings in black, along with their glowing

white faces, with their grim reaper blades, glistening in the lowering moonlight- making along with the chimes of the bell tower the don of death at 3 AM, now just dripping with the young sweet virgin blood of young girls.

‘Like she- tried to get Sturgis to steal, them all away in a promise- over her newfound the power of money that is a worthless as she is, to keep me from me returning; however, she is too dumb, simple and only plain retarded to ever do that!’ Said the new Lord of power over all-dark and magical, even their minds, she was in all their heads- screaming. ...SCREAMING!!!

Five different voices behind her bellowed, ‘Retard!’ Their eyes now white all rolled in the back of their heads as if in orgasm at once, they have all turn their backs on the one that would save them from her, yet they have no clue who she is... yet they think they know me- hush children, she said- in a mutter, yet they still mocked her, for hushing them, they were possessed by her- and she was rapping their minds clear of all thoughts- and placing heat down on them to turn them away from the one that would save them from- loss of mind, body- and even spirit alike.

Five curses flew in five different directions... and the unfair rounds began, between the girl named Naddalin- holding in the memories of Nevaeh lost inside, and the returned Dark Lord. And in opposite them shattered as they hit- beams of powers, like that they were both teleported to the graveyard were, The- towering structure, that was the love of her life now rotting and decayed- yet missing it prized ball in hand, now was convinced that if all were placed in the hands and then shatter, to end all memories and time, Naddalin would crack and surrender herself to her, and all the souls of the girls in

the land would be nothing but lost like shattered glass in the wind, a hundred glass spheres burst apart, thought the lustrous browned figures, magically they unfurled into the- air, representing all that has been whipped away, and Naddalin was the blame.

The Dark Lord had control of all memories- lost in crystal balls, like the one that bright Nevaeh back to life in a new body as Naddalin. ...And to her, they could all be wasted, just if she were the only one to last forever, by killing them off for the blood and the energy. And floating she was, losing to her straight, their voices yelling, long-dead was the body of Emma underneath, whom to the Dark Lord betrayed her, and made her into the crumbling tower she always was. Streams of power, like lightning bolts, past amongst them, with the- rush of crashing glass, where the bones of the girl arose from the grave, turning to dust in a swirl- and were sucked into the Dark Lords mouth and gulped down, to be turned into shit, all out of odium, sparks- wiping around them, as time pulled and distorted, and her body was now growing, stronger- with the long-lost body parts of the enemies inside- making the new evil soul.

And splintered wood of the dark forest cracked, fractured, broken, and mooned, canopies and falling leaves, and sticks, raining down upon the- grass floor- ash field the air, 'RUN!' Naddalin yelled, as the lives swayed in the balances of her hands- to give herself up to her, precariously and yet more glass spheres began to fall from above, represent the lives she was responsible now for killing, all the blood now covering her hands of the girl that she thought she saved.

She- the Dark Lord, has now detained the novel Emmah or 33 years of age in the renaissance, by making her appear out of thin air, to join her party- of, pestering,

Naddalin wiping behind Emmah's ceremonial dress, and dragged it forwards as she had not far of her, holding one arm over the head as chunks of glass with thought her body- and shards thundered down upon them both. Sorrow Devourer, guzzlers of decease lunged forwards through the- a cloud of dust, pulling at them and taunting even more... and Naddalin started to elbow some of them hard in the- disguised faces.

And then just like that snapped out of reality- that never really was a reality- in the first place, they were all kinds of yelling, there were cries of pain, and thunderous crashes.

Teleporting in the hit of power, and now lost within the school libraries, of long corridors of shelves that seemed never end, they started to collapse upon themselves as all and everyone was running for their lives, weirdly fragments of the- Prophets unleashed from there spheres, and all rushed in the mind of the Dark Lord, giving her the mind power of them all, and the body power of ten men. Naddalin found the- way ahead making the clearing of the books flying about and smoldering paper or ash, and saw Jinger, Jill, and Danna sprint past her, and then grabbing her hand, their arms over their heads.

Falling wooden antique parts of shelves, struck her on the- side of her- face, and frame, but she- merely ducked her head and sprinted onwards; hand in hand, even if caught, by flying fragments, her closest girlfriends by her- shoulder; yet she was still shouting out for Emmah, 'amazing!' Her- hands released her at once; they were at the- end of the 66th row; all 6 made it away, and her evil screams were shattering, to all eardrums.

There was one more... Naddalin turned right and began to sprint in solemn; she- could hear footsteps right behind, thinking the worst, then the hearing of Emmah's voice urging Neville on; the seventh girl, that was straggling along... then straight ahead, the- door through which they had come was ajar; Naddalin could see she- glittering light of the- bell that she was looking for magically it rolled into her hands- as she called it to do- the safest place she thought it could be; she- stormed through the- doorway, the- prophecy still clutched tight and safe in her hands held to gather as if praying, and waited for the- others to hurtle over her in the- threshold before slamming the- door behind- looking all the horror behind them 'Collaborates!' gasped Emmah, and the- door sealed itself with an odd squelching noise.

Portion

'Where- where are the- others?' Gaspd Naddalin.

'Don't mind that now, lest get you safe...'

Just like that as they ran, parts of the castle started crumbling to rubble ash behind them, like the bride behind them and the passage in-witch they took to get where they ran too.

She- had thought Jinger, Danna, and Jill where ahead of them, that they would be waiting in the room, but there was nobody there, they somehow were now behind, as if time were pulling them backward, and thought the ash, dust, and smog, they saw the glow of the seven young girls faces, and the tips of fingers holding to the edges, of the remanding structures.

‘They must have gone, past us,’ Jinger said in a confused way! Then whispered Emmah, now in complete and total terror facing them, that they would not make it, as she was looking on to them all and trying to pull them along.

‘Listen!’ whipped Neville.

Footsteps and shouts called out from behind the- door they had just sealed with all their bodies pressed up against even if in fear; Naddalin put her ear close to the- door to listen and heard Lori Mallerie roar,’ ‘Leave, leave her,’ I say – the doors blasted open with mighty force... as if a bomb when off, and along with that the military war marching in on them for all seraphim’s- medieval weapons drawing at this girl that was younger than them all.

The injuries will be nothing to the- Dark Lord, compared to losing that prophecy- that the others were trying to protect, that was now thrown into her hand for safe keep, as even Naddalin was running for her life to helping the others, left to defend for herself was this young girl, trust here was not even thought about- in the past, that this girl could just hand it over to save her skin- as she creeps ever so close to her in an evil fashion that was chilling to all the observed, in all ways she felt dead- even if she was already, in a fetal position whimpering and head tucked, overtop the glowing crystal, that was reflecting the life of a girl, they all heraldry new, yet felt they had no choice to save- over the fact she was the girl who existed.

‘You girl come back here!’ It was screaming.

‘...We need to organize!’ The grouping thought and aligned unanimously. And just like that in this girl of incoherent chants, of burbling, vanished in thin air.

‘We’ll split into pairs and search, for this girl- what’s her name.’ And do not forget, be gentle with her and, and more importantly the prophecy, it already has seen far too much damage.

‘Like you...’ one of them said.

Until we have the- prophecy, she can kill anyone of us at any given time- just thinking about it- ripping thought or bodies and taking over them, as I said, I am a week and cannot stopper her- and she in my head firmer than ever before.

It so varies necessarily that you find professor Sellatrix, and professor Rodolpho’s- to make potions to make me less apt to feel her side-effects, if you take the- left passageway down the tallest spier of the castle; find their offices, ‘run- do so now.’ Go right girl- and you may just find yourself- lost in long passages that you never get out of and is also the forbidden parts of the castle; also, where they have crazies, nuts, and the convicted- to be finalized- death row, locked in chains; you may never find yourself out, they may take you for an escapee and try to final kill you. Yet if you take this traiteur pathway, you will get there a lot faster. The- door straight ahead opened on its own, looking downwards was a spiraling run of steps seemed to be never-ending, dizzying, fainting feeling, along with totally disorientating.

Naddalin said- ‘come with me,’ as she made the first step!’

‘What do we do?’ Emmah asked Naddalin, trembling from head to foot.

‘So-o we all make the first step and fall 333 feet to other doors, therefore this has been amended, most blow-chunks the first time.’

...And that is what they did, screaming till they hit the bottom and maximum velocity, till they hit- below, just inches, and halting noses just 3 inches from the ground all 6 were looking at cawing infested, and cobweb-laced, cobblestone-covered in a thick coating of soot, dust, grime and dirt, skulls, and shrunken heads everywhere...

‘Let us get away from the door.’ Naddalin said in a hast.

‘Well, do not just stand there waiting for them to find us, let us run for it,’ said Naddalin.’ They ran as quietly as they could- flickering gas lamps dimly lit the way on the stone walls- as they went down the death row block, they were trying not to grab the attention of those in their dungeons- that looked to be dripping with ooze- as their chins rattled yet- they babbled, along with making hacking-up sounds of discussing vomit, and they were mooning out for help- in between the gagging of the feelings of purgatory, no-names- also known as (Emanon’s) they had at this point just numbers of being lost to the next move down the inferno, you could see in number plates on the large iron bar- cell-doors.

Then past the- homering glowing green jars of fetuses, lining the shelves of the passageways, of long corridors. and- the tiny egg was bobbing in the glass- blinking at them, ‘mothers kill’ said Naddalin to the others that were mortified... along with saying a moment later, ‘in abortions, this is where they come to die...’

Some looked as if they were hatching inside, as they- the girls, were so freaked out they ran towards the- exit, on what seems like a never-ending tight tunnel, then into the- circular-like hallway, with stain-glass arched windows following along, which made multi-colored, shadows of dancing light rays on the hallway, at the- far end of the- room- ramping downwards as they went. In too yet, more long passageways, that linked to the- teachers' corners. They were there when Naddalin heard something large and heavy collide with the- last and final door, Emmah had charmed shut.

After all that, they finally found the two professors they were looking for and they were all asked into their teachers' studies, where they did the position that they needed, to keep the Dark Lord out of their minds if only for a brief time. altogether they said a ritual, with their wonders, held hands and cast a spell and they vanished to another place, now standing between the empty rows of an empty classroom!' said in a rough voice.'

(Almora,) They said as they cast the spell...

Portion

As the door flew open, Naddalin, Emmah, and Neville dived under desks- it was here, all evil and wings spread looking to suck the life out of every soul in the room, that was on their side. Additionally, the fights between morals and evil took place as they did over a century ago.

They could see both of the- two Demise Eaters robes drawing close nearby adjacent and nearer, floating rapidly. You might have run straight through to the- halls of

halls and passageways of passageways,’ said she- rough voice, along with saying- ‘just to stop me yet you will NEVER-EVER-EVER!’ "Some if not most were tucked under their- desks,’ said another- ‘oh, yes- but she will, and if not her, us too along with her.’

Naddalin saw the- undulating bodies of the- Demise Eaters bend; pointing the wands out from under the- desk, they- shouted, (STUFAIRIE!) ...They all shouted, why? ...To mobilize them, and fad- into vanishing them to another place, outside their realm- of time, space, and the same place they were all at.

Then a jet of inflamed red light hit the- nearest Demise Eater; she- fell backward into a granddaddy clock and knocked it over; the- second Demise Eater. However, had leaped aside to avoid Naddalin’s spell, and she cast and was pointing her wand at Emmah- who received it, that now was crawling out from under the- desk, like a pussycat. The wand dropped, and she scampered off, as Naddalin got repositioned to get a better aim. (Avada,) she said- as the beam of the spell was cast faster than the speed of light.

Naddalin launched herself across the- floor and grabbed the- Demise Eater around the- waist, causing her to collapse and she aims to go awry. Neville overturned a desk in the nervousness, edginess, jumpiness, and uneasiness to help, and pointing the wand enthusiastically, wild like, at the- struggling pair, she- cried out:
(EXLLARMPIEUS!)

(AMATAPLYUS,) WAS CALLED OUT BY, Neville- and now there were two Naddalins as if cloned. Both Naddalin’s and the- Demise Eater’s wands flew out of

their hands, and now it was a fair fight though, Neville, as her thoughts were read, by everyone rears her, including- YOU, KNOW WHOM!

‘CUTE’ was the thoughts given back as if mockery- most definitely contemptuous, scornful, and condescending. Now ripped out of the body of Naddalin was the stinginess of just a lost hang- dangling emotion web out of the mind- of Naddalin, of Nevaeh, now cast in a ball, as- the Dark Lord, was winning- as it was just them now left- now both transported in her round... at this moment, Naddalin- flew back towards the- entrance a week Naddalin at that now having her mind-wiped of all that was a lingering soul within, to the- Hall of Prophecies; wherein a swopping swirl, all the crystals on the shives were jumbled in the air like a coordinated dance and left to find new homes on the shive before them. Now saying- ‘now you do as I had to find your life- and soul and get it back.’

Now, both scrambled to their feet and charged at each other, the- Demise Devourer in front- sucking yet more love and memories out of her head, and replacing them with nothing but pain and the feelings of death and dying- and the feeling of flames licking her body, Naddalin hot on her heels- was giving all she had to fight back, and Neville brought up the- rear, purely terrified, frightened, and entirely petrified by what she- had observed, perceived, and witnessed.

‘Get out of the way, Naddalin!’ Yelled Neville, clearly determined to repair the- damage, and the cat eyes- glowing glass green, we are looking at them in the dark shadows- as just a hint of light was cast on them, far- far in the back of the room,

sheepish- and timed- pawing the floor was Emmah, just looking for someone to turn her back into a girl.

Naddalin flung herself sideways as Neville took aim again and shouted:

(STUPEFY!)

Moreover, then just like that, at that moment at that time, at that very place, a jet of red light flew right over the- Demise Devourer's shoulder and hit a frosted glass-cabinet, on the- wall full of variously shaped hourglasses; the- cabinet fell to the- floor.

All the sands of time- lost- of the minds, that were thought to be most invaluable it was their ashes, of their past life, that filter down the funnel, and legend had it, that when all were depleted, this world would end, and now time was going to be altered.

Those like Professor McDermott, yet individuals, that can afford burial are placed here, and sport apart, was all glass now flying everywhere, sprang back up onto the wall, fully mended, then fell again and horrified; more destruction that could never-ever be replaced.

The- Demise Devourer had snatched up the wand- that was Emmah's, which lay on the- floor beside the- glittering glass, among the ash.

Naddalin ducked down behind another desk as she- turned- to face the evil-now blazing body- licked by hells flames of the Dark Lord- flaying up in the air in great

speed, to attack her flanges, hands with claws, looking as they could rip; a masked face slithered ever so-o inches into hers- and then tilted, with an evil grin of- I will slay you!

So, close she- could not see anything other than wild wicked fire-engine-red eyes- sit deep in a pale white face, only having the small over her dying breath. She- ripped off a scream that shattered all the glass and windows all around, within the castle and the nearby villages of the towns. Now with free hands, Naddalin was strangling her back, and shouted: ‘STUP-’ (STUPEFY!) ...Then screamed Emmah, who had just caught up with them, after the spell wore off- after 30 or so minutes.

A jet of red light hit the- Demise Devourer in the middle of the chest: making them fall to nothing but ash, froze in her movement was Naddalin, her arms still raised- to the skies above, the ceiling of the room blasted off showing the graying skies above- now poring sheets of rain down on everything, evil expressions - steak in the lightning bolts, around and hitting the Dark Lord, as she was going for the slaying and slaughter.

Linked together now by wands- blue to red- making purple, they rise and fall wings in flight- flapping, and spread and forced upwards by the energy, then falling to the- floor- with a thud, with a clatter, and the- collapsing of Naddalin’s stuck wings, she flies backward towards all the others who are whispering in huddles, in the back of the classroom.

Portion

Naddalin expected to hear a dunk this, from the- man that was the head of positions- and dark arts, that was to keep the Dark Lord out of her head, yet that was

wishful thinking- no at this point it was just an empty mason jar, she was also dreaming to think that she was hitting something like solid glass underneath her sore tired body that was all cut up and broken in places, also, neither at this point was going to be a reality, he slides her- jar rolling it on the- floor.

‘Try to dust-up as much of their life’s as you can- with your hands- their life’s now running through her fingers, of why she was the girl who existed and not them,’ then in trying so, but instead there was a gust of wind cast by the now weekend Dark Lord, and all that was them- was now just dust in the wind- blowing- away to only be that memory left of them in their minds, Naddalins- head sank to her knees, as she felt less than heroic.

What was leftover was- was a mixture of all, that was adored, cherished, and treasured, now defiled by the Dark Lords- gains- and Naddalin- holding the now lost life of Naveah was the blame for it all, this was the punishment. All the ash of the beloved was just glittering to the outward, and though her hands and pilling overtop her wand, most escaping from around the rim of the jar, and into the craves of the wood plank flooring and lost in the winds around.

Naddalin- came to rest, laying by one of the crystal-ball, on the floor not at all sprawled out more like cuddled around it, hoping she found the right one, when asked to do so-o, holding the life of her past life, the life of a girl that should never be forgotten... or said to be a legend, that she was the one that lived- or as she always felt, only to exist.

Naddalin's beam of power still the strongest, yet all seven of them with the stems of power, linking together were cast heavily to back her down, to the point of vanishing in a moment of feeling shamed defeat, of losing the fight- the Dark Lord off lost to everyone in this world, and they had no idea where she would pop up next- that was the scariest part of her silence, now more wicked than ever before- and unpredictable of feeling conquered.

Now sitting at a desk and her back pressed on the wooden set, she placed the jar on the table, along with half her mind lying inside the ball. With the hopes she was right when asked to choose, she looked down to amazement it was next to the jar, color swirled through it, it was full of names showing in whipping scrolling text- then moving frames and visions of the past playing out... the past of the girl's life; we all know as- Nevaeh, the girl that existed, she has somehow found the right one.

The only thing now to do was place her back into her body of Naddalin to live on... Yet, she was not sure how this would work, if she would like more like Naddalin or more like Naveah this time around, it was like a rebirth, she flicked her wand over the ball! And Emmah cried nonstop if this were to go wrong, they both could be lost and left to be ash.

Naddalin's wand flew into a dark corner, along with her, and her dark wings clasped around her body now nude and transforming itself- back into the evil angel she was formerly to the attacks, she looked like a bird that was wounded knocked out of the flight. Then into the hands of Emmah, she lay the only covering over her body is the black feathery wings of her body, around her singing her like a hug, and the ball in front

of her face glowing, cuddling into her lap, Emmah running her fingers through her hair, hoping for the best...

-And-

Then marvelously in those times of them all feeling hopeless, a surprising- unpredicted, unanticipated, unforeseen, and startling moment her eyes light up blue, and flow open wildly full of life... It was her- all over again- yet as if she were 14 like the day she passed.

Portion

‘Thanks,’ she- said. ‘Right, let us get out of here now, we need to hide you!’

‘I am not going to hind, that’s all I have done all my life... and why should I?’
‘Look out!’ said Neville, horrified. She- was staring at the- Decease Feeder’s head just- shuffles- and creeps in front of her.

All seven of them raised their hands another time- feeling a moment of freedom- and triumph, taking flight- they all razed in flight- and then teleported to a safe-spot on a beach, none of them collided this time as they run down on to the black, with the blue-green glowing waters at their bare feet- light only by the oversized moon, with that they were safe...

They were off to see Professor Mr. Suebur Dirgah who lived in a straw hut, with a girl extremely white pail elf named Mildred Mcguire, pink eyes, and had the personality of that of a bunny rabbit, that she sometimes would transform into, as a pet.

They were all gazing, open-mouthed, in his doorway shocked to see him, and what had happened to them- this man's head as big as all of them combined- after all he was a long white bearded giant.

(Back, the girls that witnessed.)

It... she... her... was shrinking very fast her body then, growing bolder and Threadbare, like the web that was once all that was left of Nevaeh, just fibers of the mind, and one's soul, grown like a fetus, as if making a new taking on the experience of a baby growing in labor in fast motion, made whole once more, in the open, her black hair stubble retracting out of her head of the skull that was also like to girls head coming together to make one body; the cheeks becoming smooth- and she was a toddler now then child then adolescent, the skull round and full, the face we know and love, yet covered with a peach-like fuzz- her body was covered with it- light blond, that would bush away to leave smooth glowing skin, reviling a Goddess fallen angel, as said looking like the day she did when she passed on earth when she was fourteen.

Back when on Earth she did not have a wand over the fact they did not work on Earth and magic outside this world is- well forbidden, just like at one-time love was forbidden too.

Then it was reviled, in the jar of ash, was left... of them all- here and the girls too- what looked a baby's head smocking and shriveled up- on top the cinders.

Naddalin scooped all the ash angels, righteous and malicious, now mixed and tightened the lid, that now is sitting disturbingly on the floor, as all of them gazed at it

think the worst, like all of them, could rise from the ashes at any point, and they did- they did; defiling the memory of what was noble- they somehow used their ashes to resume life in the dark world- now all five were at large.

Sick cold reminders of what the original Dark Lord, standing before them, that has become yet once more- Lord to all, defeated just to rise once more, said Emmah, 'look though, I have the hart she took it was stolen from a little girl a girl named, Lily years ago, to make her the Lord reaper the last time around.'

Emmah- 'So-o now as payback, I have that heart sitting in a jar on my desk- like a humorous reward if only to me for my eyes being gauged out of the head as a young girl, it like me claiming a victory, yet nevertheless, also now tainted, besmirched and tarnished, by the reclaims of power by Mazel we all have suffered- over the fact that this heart was once pure, I lost sight and reclaimed, and all of us violated, mind-body, and spirit.'

The army of Demise Eaters, still looking for bodies to claim. And the attacks of power continued. Then once more fighting- of linked up beams, seven to five, thunderous sticks, of bolts of energy, stock them, and then back, along with cast spells names.

Then as fast as it started it ended...

Mazel and their girls attempted lives, FAILED! The lives, that they have stolen... just to have an existence, like Neveah... now bobbing with a thing muscled neck in a backlight glowing avocado vessel.

Yes, all lives of young fallen angel girls, that end too soon, that was never-ever theirs for the taking in the first place, now soulless, just petrified corpses- sullied- dishonored- eyes wide open dazed- braindead expressions, mumbling gibberish, lost with no minds- as karma, and lost to other with minds now more than they all around- like Nevaeh.

Ricocheting in a way of everything, they wished on their enemies, and number one adversary- Nevaeh. Hitherto, comical as everyone's mind around was whipped to forget the tragedy.

Now hopefully, locked in this room their souls will stay as fallen ash, which is off-limits to all... forever in the restricted sections of the castle.

Up till now, Naddalin with the remembering's of Nevaeh in her head knew it was only a matter of time before, she and her four girls would be back- with a fiery vengeance, as fallen angels in this world or worse on Earth looking for girls' minds, and bodies to take over and down.

The Amzel mother and the girls- their head began to swell under the pressures to its previous proportions again- as if they would not freaking die- yet looked as if they were liquefying; thick black hair like tentacles, were sprouting from them wiping around evil, snacks wrapped there body, alike wildly pentagrams growing on their chests, just four disembodied head now we're sitting on their chins- jabbering on the floor- mindless muttering nothings- with deep black perishing eyes... then- evil screams came from them all, as black gunk gushed from their mouth, like asphalt grand geyser- reverting mixers of

life they had coming out of them, spiders and maggots devouring them as they turn to mush.

‘Nevaeh- the voice coming through and out, Naddalin’s body of their mouth said, they look no different to me now as they did then and doing the same thing spewing grossness... and taking a river of ignorance.’

Then the- Demise Devourer struggled to get up again; but even as they watched- in shock and awe, their mouths open- during the life out of Naddalin and the seven girls, even more, the war was over, they were nothing to what they just went through, ‘It’s Time,’ said Emmah in a stunned voice. ‘Time...’

She called out the spell to wipe them all away...

The- Demise Guzzler shook their ugly head again as they were also fading away like a flicker, then the dust settled, and the sun rays began glowing in the room through the arch windows and the reminders of the castle; a spell said once more by Emmah, to clean the air around. All seven were shaken, frightened, scared, afraid, fearful, and terrified now in a group hug; just trying to clear their thoughts more...

but before they- could pull themselves together the room began to break and crumble around them, sound like gunshots- and blowing bangs,

‘Ha- back to babyhood once more... funny it comes around, and everybody gets a turn,’ said Nevaeh, in the body of Naddalin, holding up her one finger as she said the statement of karma.

There was a shout from a room nearby- many slain and moving on to lower levels of the underworld, they could not be saved, all like deaths, and friends these girls have gotten used to, then a crash and a scream. It was 'JINGER?' A long shard of the crystal was through her still- hart, killing her off in a final way, the soul lost...

Naddalin yelled, turning quickly from the- atrocious transformation that took place before them.'

'JILL? DANNA?' 'Naddalin!' Emmah screamed their names.

The- Demise Guzzler the profuse arms flailed dangerously in all directions, had pulled the head up and they were all looking down into the jar of ashes, now once more ash angels that have disintegrated. The was entirely strange, the tiny baby head's they became bawling loudly while, as the simmering in the ash, crumbling parts of the walls and the overhead roof just missing Naddalin just like the hexes and curses coming from their word of mouth, who had ducked.

Emmah raised her wand, but to the astonishment, wonder, bewilderment, and phenomenon, Naddalin grabbed her arm saying-

Naddalin- 'You can't hurt a baby!' It was said contemptuously.

Emmah- 'Oh, yes- but I can!'

Naddalin could hear more, footsteps growing louder from the- Hall of Insight, and knew, too late, that she- ought not to have shouted and given away their location. There was no time to argue with Emmah then and there- pointed, and they were

obliterated, hopefully out of there and everybody lives for the rest of time. ‘Come on!’ She- said, as they started to run off, holes too tight to fly, along with barely light.

Come on let us just leaving the- ugly baby-headed, for the Demise Guzzler staggering behind, was all seven of the girls, that had Naddalin’s back all along, they- they took off up the Shawna Parker part of the Hall of Books- Named for the sycophant professor, you know what I, you, and us- like we do not care... all the girls said she was just nasty! She passed- finally a long time ago, like 300 years back.

...A heavy wooden door, that stood open at the the-other end was pitch black and had them all uneasy as if something were leaking and asking and drawing them towards it as if it had something to say in that part of the- room, leading back into the black hallway.

Emmah said- ‘Look here, I found this old dirty- handwritten book here- has not been touched in about 100 years- that looks as if it just feels from the shelves, of a girl, that said she was taken over, mind body and soul- yes, by a girl, that was a ghost called Lucy, or so she calls her self- Lucy- yet she was- ‘mm-hum...’ (and the girls pointed to the one they thought.)

-And-

...When within her head...

‘Like- like, um, there is no name on it,’ It was Nevaeh coming thought, the body of Naddalin when said, in a whisper.

Up till now, she was the demon in masquerade as a little girl- that was run over by a train- remember that? All done so there would be trust then she would take over a mind, this story here reviles the truth- it was her all along!

(The girls in chat chitchatting)

‘What was that girl's name...? I remember her, don’t you?’

‘...And them too.’ Said Naddalin, with the creepy undertones of Naveah higher up voice over the same out of the mouth, of Naddalin.

Just before Emmah said Look, they had run halfway towards it when Naddalin saw through the- open door, glowing in an orb and then wiping on to the page Emmah readout perceptibly.

Then two more Demise Devourers were running towards the- back black room towards them and they were sucked up into the pages of the book; swirling as they left this part of their world, in a porthole- of emotion into year another lower dimension; then that of the one they were at that given moment in time and space.

The book filtered up and snapped shut, and then disappeared into thin air, then just after that- she and the girls burst instead into a small, dark, disorganized office- that was no longer used and slammed the- door behind them, saying along with thinking about how bizarre everything, that happened was...

Emmah began to say ‘Collo, to move back to the main parts of the castle-,’ but before she would- could complete the- spell the- hardback book reappeared and then

opened beside- two Demise Devourers had come hurtling out inside the room they were standing in, ready to attack them.

The cover had changed- the dust jacket was gone forever, and the pages were more yellow, it was not the same book at all like one was tossed out for the other to be entered in this world when opened the pages streamed with a glowing beam of light. Then with a cry of triumph, both yelled- out of Naddalin's mouth, saying 'this is the lost book that you have written,' the story of your life- Nevaeh, (yes, yes- it is- she was thrilled yet terrified of her own words at this point, she whispered repeatedly.)

'It's all in black and white, now what they did- don't you understand!' said Emmah, along with saying 'they were hiding within the text to keep their memories of them alive- for the moment that just took place.'

Naveah alleged, so in a way by me saying- their names within my story, I keep them locked in there all those years to hunt me in the afterlife, over the fact I gave them power over me and my lives.

'IMPEDIMENTA!' Naddalin said, locking the names out and blacking them over within the text of the book forever with black bars of censorship when in the book, locking their soul out to all that see or read their names.

'Wishful thinking,' said Naveah in the mind of Naddalin, they always find a way, I am sure like this is not the only place they have memories missing- to keep their soul, to come back to attack me, for no resigning what-so-ever...

'What did you do to piss them off?' Said Neville.

Read this book, and do not ask me dumb questions, scared Nevaeh out of Naddalin's mouth, who after many lifespans was sick of hearing this inquiry- of why.

'Hey, it's been lost for years, now how would I be able?' She squealed, back. Yeah, I forgot, that is why others do not get me now, I forgot, seems to be the story of my life, made to forget, or said too.

Naddalin, Emmah, and Neville were all knocked backward off their feet. Neville was thrown over a desk and disappeared, at that point. Emmah smashed into the bookcase, that was holding all the books under the first initial- N and was promptly swamped in a cascade of heavy books.

'Your initial scare me at this point' said Emmah, being 3 N's looking like 3 sixes' in a row like the marked, you now have them as N. N. N. and, as if manifested by evil, Nevaeh spoke up and said 'in a way I am- and was and live to tell the tale, of being mark by the devil's, offering herself. Then not long after that thought, she said, 'I think you're overworking your mind thinking of conspiracy theories and being over superstitious.'

The- back of Naddalin's head slammed and started to exploit only the blood she has, moving her hair she saw the scar there, magically- like the change to the same making of three N's... into the- body of Neveah, this marking was also copied, the pain was felt, as both cry, from the feelings of it cutting in the skin for the lower leaves up the underworld below, as if done by them, as more revenge.' The wall behind her, tiny lights

burst in front of the eyes, orbs of them, and for a moment she- was too dizzy and bewildered to react, to them looking her in the eyes in a time of her being feeble.

‘WE’VE GOT HER!’ The transparent orbs, that were glowing and floating in the air said.

Emmah- ‘Oh, no but you don’t.’ ...And before they could say any more, she slapped a book closed hard till thing in the room jingled, locking them into it, forever; once more dreaming... She yelled as more Demise Devourer neared Naddalin, brought on by the attack.

‘Ciosilen!’ Cried Emmah, making the book burst into flame, and the- voice within screamed, as they felt the heat of hell licking their soul, or what was left of them. Then it was extinguished, and the pain of them stopped along with the Posttraumatic-stress disorder attacks, on their minds.

‘Just another part of them sold.’ Said Nevaeh within Naddalin’s mind.

She continued to mouth, the- through she had into the mask looked of Naddalin blank expression- morning over it like, as if the sands of a gaping hole were sucking in the soundings in, but no sound came out, instead of the girl within blasted out in a black tar-like liquid, then to rise as the girl we knew all those years back, she was back, in the flesh. She was alive, and more stunning than ever, 14 all over.

The two girls looked at each other more confused, dazed and muddled than ever, they came together in an embracing hug, and said, ‘it is so-o nice to finally meet you, both in tears.’

Portion

‘The next time they give me shit I am going to take this umbrella and shove it up one of their pee holes and open it.’ Naddalin said, as she looked out and saw it dumping rain outside in a pinkish hue, as the sky was graying and overcast. They both walked hand in hand out into the newfound calm and peace that was like airlifted around them, or weights lifted off their shoulders. ‘I don’t feel as if I have ALS anymore, I have my life back!’ Yelled Nevaeh, free from the body of another after over 100 years, lost within.

(One year has passed)

There was a came before the storm, Nevaeh was thrust aside, was all the thoughts before off all the pain and by the following Demise Devourer. ‘Petteri ficusalus!’ Naddalin shouted as the- additional Demise Feeder raised its wand. Her arms and legs snapped together and she- fell forwards, unable to move like she was before fragile and overcome by dark feelings, now face down on to the- rug at Naddalin’s feet was the almost lifeless- Nevaeh, stiff as a board, and swallowing her tongue, and unable to move, only her eyes, could move to show there was still a mind there. ‘Well, Ha-’ Demise Feeder said, only a year of freedom was given to this SHIT before the dark powers would reclaim victory.

-Besides-

...And she will remain victorious!

Nonetheless, the- Demise Eater had Emmah, and she had just collided with a sudden dumb movement made a slashing herself open, with her wand to the point of hemorrhaging out.

Then a streak of what looked like an elaborate flame passed right across Emmah's chest. She would- give a tiny - 'Oh!' as though of amazement, wonder, admiration, total shock, and incredulity. Then crumpled on to the- floor, where she would- lay stationary, motionless, immobile, and fully still.

Portion

Continued: 1

(Back to Nevaeh's story)

'So how was your first day back?'

I drop onto the couch in the girl's room and then kick off my shoes and prop my feet up on the carved wood coffee table.

Then just close my eyes- I have unwanted thoughts and memories of everything of all things past, and sighing dramatically saying, 'Essentially, it was a lot easier than you'd think, to be me.'

Naddalin laughs and sinks beside me. Smoothing my hair off my face when she says, 'Then what's with all the exhaustion, tiredness, fatigue, collapse, enervation and theatrics?'

Naddalin- I then shrug, scrunching down even lower, sinking as deep as I can into the plush, overstuffed cushions, eyes still closed as I say, 'I do not know. Maybe- it has something to do with the book I found. It left me feeling a little-fragmented. But then, it might have something to do with my surprise visit with- you.'

'You read my book, didn't you?'

Her lips trail down the length of my neck, filling my body with tingle and heart. 'As in, the outdated way?' I move closer, throwing my leg over her and snuggling in, eager for the almost feel of her skin.

'Believe me, I tried to take the effortless way out and just sense it instead, but it was like I don't know it was the weirdest experience.' I look at her, willing her eyes to meet mine, but they remain closed as her interns' face in my hair.

'After all these years being inside you, you are me- and I- you, and we make one, and I love you, and need you.' Naddalin said to Nevaeh.

'It was like-like the knowledge inside was too powerful to be read in that way, you know?' It like everything that you said was me... and I fell in love with the girl in the book, which was me, that was you that was and is us. That is love, that is love after all two being one.'

Nevaeh- 'You gave me the terrible jolt of electricity- like a shock that rattled my bones when you're next to me; I feel this also...'

Naddalin- ‘You have made me even more curious- about me and what lay just in the side, and then looking out, which is why I tried to read it the normal way, Only I didn’t get very far- before I knew it all too well.’

‘Just out of repetition?’ She smiles- as she thought me yet now looking at me as if it were merrowed in my stare, lips at my ear, sound all too familiar. Said Naddalin.

‘More like I couldn’t understand it, all before making it comprehend in my mind like it was already laying within my brain.’ Said Naddalin.

Nevaeh- (I shrug.)

‘It is mostly encoded within the moral fibers of my awareness of the mind. Besides the parts that are English, well, it was like old English, to the others now but to me, it was easy to understand.

‘Antibiotic, you were to me, therapeutic like.’ Said Nevaeh.

‘You know, like the kind you used to speak.’

‘Not to mention the print was small and it was filled with all these weird sketchers and symbols making up spells and invocations, that sort of thing. Why are you looking at me like that?’ I pause, sensing a major energy shift as her body grows tense...

‘What’s the name of the book?’ She asks, gazes focused on mine.

I pull away and peer at her, smiling when I see the look of pretend outrage displayed on her face.

I squint, screwing my lips to the side, trying to remember what the fancy gold lettering said. ‘The Book of-Something, that was nothing more than blah, blah, and blah-’ I shake my head, feeling more tired and fragmented than I prefer to let on, especially after seeing the concern on her face.

‘Shadows- moved creeping in the room- just out of the corners of their eyes yet both saw them, ‘Spirits of the Past’ ‘Shadow People.’ She nods, wearing a frown. ‘The Book of Shadows. Is that it?’ ‘The Darkness Within,’ is that what you are trying to give me, as a clue, with these shadows we see?

‘This is not me donging that, it is time go... I feel uneasy.’

‘So, you know it is not us, or any of them, they are all asleep at this point, so it must be spying for them, what do you think?’

I shift, arranging my body until I am fully facing her, she gazes is so serious, fixed, as though weighing something she may or may not tell me, she was still afraid to be herself with me, yet she was in love with me I knew it, and that never well stop us... Never- Ever!

‘I’m familiar with feeling this way.’ She studies my face. ‘But only with its character. I have never had a chance to read it myself. But, ever, if it is the right time- I am thinking of it... I will.’

She shakes her head at once, disquietly shadowing her face, with mine.

‘Together we have something, that contains some extremely powerful magic-magic that needs to be approached with the utmost caution and upkeep. The magic that should not be toyed with, understand?’

‘So-o I guess you’re saying it works, for us.’ I smile, hoping to lighten the mood, but knowing I have failed when she does not return it, it hard for me to fall... every time I do, it ends in death.’ Said Nevaeh.

‘It’s nothing like the magic we use, it’s like a sick pleasure.’

It may seem like it at first, and I suppose that when stripped down to its very essence, it does amount to the same sort of thing.

Nevaeh- ‘Nevertheless when we evoke the energy of the universe to manifest form, we call upon only the purest and brightest of light with no darkness at all.’

‘Ah, I love when your philosophy-a-pha-z...’ Whispered Naddalin.

‘Besides even though most magic surgeons or watchers are good, sometimes when people get involved in witchcraft they get in over their heads, and wind up taking a much darker path, calling on a more malevolent force to get the job done.’

I gape, never having heard her even acknowledge a dark force before, and think we are like surgeons at our craft. It was sweet...

‘Everything we do is always based either for the greater good or our good, she said, looking at me in deep thoughts of wisdom.

(Out aloud chattering of thoughts.)

‘We never- ever do anything to cause any harm.’

‘Yet, why do some take all and others get none.’

‘I wouldn’t say- never- to karma coming around it well in time.’

I mumble, remembering all the time that I have beaten Emmah at her own game, or at least tried to, by letting her have her way, and now I must shout out my brain and just go with it; and let her have her way- with me, and for once stop thinking.

Naddalin- ‘It’s funny to me, that they say you don’t think when that is all you do non-stop.’ Up-cucking you- back out to me was the best thing that has ever happen to me as a girl, that has fallen.

‘You have such a way with words, Naddalin.’ She said back to me.

‘Petty schoolyard squabble is hardly what I am getting at- it truly remarkable,’ yet that is all they said you could do and now look at you, you have made assess out them all, and you should ask why you can do what I have after all your education was far more superior to mine.’

She then now dismisses my thoughts, of what I said, ‘it sounds so childish to have spite over something that was in the past.’

‘What I meant was, we manipulate matter, not people. But resorting to spelling casting to get what you want-’ She shakes her head. ‘Well, that is a whole other game. Ask Neville and Rayne.’

I look at her, looking at all the handwriting in these notebooks beforehand, of publishing of this document, think the girl you hold the world records for the longest book, and longest manuscript, and eBook too. She looks at me with a funny little grin on her face, as I look over her pages- in awe.

Naddalin said, ‘Not bad for someone that was classed to only have a 2nd grade reading a writing ability. Now say let us see you do it, and then you think about it, and they cannot even read the synopsis on the back cover or know what synopsis means to begin with...’

Nevaeh- ‘...And the best thing about it all was it was all bullshit!’

Naddalin- ‘greed and jealousy.’

‘They are witches, you know, and that is why...’

‘Yes, maybe that is the why- of it all!’

‘Good witches...’

‘Like- of course, ones who were taught very well-though unfortunately for them, their schooling was cut a bit short.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘They had their mind on you, and after a while, that becomes a paper trail, and it leads right back to them.’

‘But take Lily, for instance, she’s the perfect example of what can go wrong when one’s ego, greed, and insatiable need for power and revenge steer them toward the dark side.’

‘Her recent use of hypnosis is a prime example of that.’ This was all said in conversations.

She looks at me, shaking her head back and forth. ‘Please tell me you did not find the book on the restricted self- tell me how may have cheeked this thing out... (‘1’) ‘...really,’ okay now place it out on display where just anyone can get it.’

‘Well, and we all know whom that one was...’

‘Um-hm...’

Portion

She read my mind before, like- I said what I was going to. I cross my legs and shake my head, fingers tracing the seam on her sleeve. ‘It was nothing like that,’ I say.

‘The copy was old- and she looked and said this was the first print ever- why do you think she wanted.

‘Like you don’t know...?’

‘...And I mean, really, old, the binding is falling apart, you sure you want this thing out where any girl can finger it.’

‘Sure do...’

-And-

‘...Then maybe they will finally understand.’

~*~

You know, all fragile and ancient-like it should be in a museum or something...

Your right...

‘...I know I am...’ Said Naddalin.

‘I will have scans made, and new prints for all, and have this thing in every girl’s hand in this great vast land, I am sure it will be an overnight success.’

Trust me, whoever it belongs to... at that point will no longer be a thing, it well belongs to the world. And be under glass, on the page of your liking. What page would you like?

She holds up her one hand, and the book springs to page 292, which is where it falls open as if it had something to say... and it did... well, let them read that page under glass then...’

‘Sure...’ Nevaeh said back.

‘I am sure the pluck well says more... then what is left here now...’

‘Like- Like- um do not underestimate yourself, for being a wonder of our world.’

‘Or did you want anyone to know about it; quite the contrary... that is why she had the first copy to understand me, and my plan for next, and to have redemption, reclamation, and recovery.’

They went to great lengths to hide it...

Naddalin- ‘I do not get it, but why...? Why? Why- do they care so much in taking you down with them...?’

...?...

‘That I never get, and we may never know the- why, just like a book that seems to never end, it’s just because.’

‘...Until this very, the day I don’t know why...’

Portion

Nevaeh- ‘But you know that can’t stop me from asking the question until it looks, and I look, and they look stupid.’

‘I don’t remember the why or because, or the who what and when, really anymore, so how do they, let it go- it's rotting, this grudge they have over me... let it go- already.’

Naddalin- ‘Over us... at this point remember, I was you... and you were me... we made one, now as two... always two but all ways one, and that makes to main girls the same, yet still two different girls, yet not- this is insane.’

Therefore... Sometimes we have a tough time following it all, some things were lost, and some were gained.

I grin, hoping she will smile too, but her gaze remains unchanged, worried eyes staring right into mine.

‘Who do you think is going to read it first?’

Lina or Apryl?’ She asks, along with saying, ‘they are about the only ones, that can read and would want to take on a challenge like this...’ Ha- using their names so casually you would think they were friends.

‘Does it matter?’ I shrug.

‘...No.’

‘Not to me either...’

Portion

She studies me a moment longer, then averts her gaze, to the room and the others that were looking at us that we did not see, being so caught up in each other.

Mind-wandering to some long-ago place, somewhere I have never been, yet was there all along it was lost in her thoughts.

‘So-o is that it, then, you love me for my mind- and I- you?’

‘Yes, I think so-o.’

A brief encounter with the Book of Fake Hero’s, and you are all tuckered out?’

‘You think their fake hero’s...’

If you ask me, it is a book to live your life by, like a Bible, if you will, an anthem to all young ladies.’ She says, returning to me.

‘Tuckered...?’ I ask; I lift my brow saying that- and shake my head. Her odd choice of words never fails to amuse me.

‘Too dated...?’ Her lips curve into a grin.

‘There was a little one.’ Without delay, I nod, laughing along with her.

‘You should not make fun of the elderly. What are you now like a hundred and five?’

‘Quite... don’t be rude!’

‘...Don’t you think, you’re forgetting that I am so much older than you?’ She playfully wedges me under the chin, saying age is just a number.

‘Quite...’

I nod with my head, quieted, calmed, hushed, silenced, and fall silent by the feel of her fingers straying over my cheek, and then down my neck, all the way to my chest.

We rest our heads against the cushions and gaze at each other said the others looking at the two lover braids...

At that moment, her hands moving nimbly, deftly, making their way over my clothes, both of us wishing it could lead to something more, but figured out to be content with what that could mean... like, would the world end if...? It would be like loving oneself.

‘Then again, I was told all my life that was A-Okay- so-o why not.’

‘Like what could happen?’

Then she murmurs and undertones, pressing her lips to my skin, the ever-present blanket hovering between us, also magical.

She pulls away holding on to the small crystal necklace around her neck-saying, ‘can I have this?’

‘I love these kinds of jewels!’ Said, Naddalin.

‘Here you can have mine...’ Said, Nevaeh.

This crystal is as old as me, then there were features reorganized into her, glowing in it, as she told me to gaze into the side of it- lost found memories, to remember them, and keep them safe.

‘Relax. It is not like she was looking for a reading or anything, with mine- but mine did the same... yet it was showing the story of my life before she was ever in it. Said Naddalin.

‘Or at least she did not seem to be, unhappy with what she got.’ I was not with mine... it showed her authoring this long story. That did not need to read yet knew off by heart... showing all the work, truly unbelievable.

‘Look at what she did?’ Naddalin, keep saying that over and over.

Emmah looked a little jealous, with a look on her face that exhibited, displayed, and presented all that fact, that she was ever so-so envious.

Nevaeh- ‘Naddalin, I guess, this show your loved ones, and that one that was everything to you also.’

‘Yes.’

I lift my shoulders, inching my fingers under the hem of her shirt, then touching and having the sensations of her smooth expanse of skin, and wishing I could crawl under there too, and feel everything that is her.

(Chatting)

‘It was weird seeing her alone though. You know, without Emmah or Mireille, she still likes you and cannot and it is eating at her more than you will ever know.

‘I think your right, it like death, to love someone and not be able over any reasoning, in this case, it would be like me taking my own that I have razed, and saying that okay, and now with you, I am still at odds.’

~*~

Nevaeh- ‘It’s like she was a different person-all shy and awkward, completely transformed, thanks to me.’ In a way she reminds me of me, more of a child to me than my own was, she was all for her daddy and had no time for me what-so-ever, yet that was Jaylynn.’

‘I feel childish and foolish to be doing this... don’t you, it does not like I am a kid anymore...’

Naddalin- ‘...Neither am I.’

Portion

‘You think she likes me at all now?’

After all these years she still will not forgive me...

‘Who- love...’

‘My child, and her too both were right in your head.’

Her fingers trace the line of my collarbone, her touch so warm, so perfect, barely dimmed by the covering over us both, as the fire was a-glow, sparking, cracking, and with embers. I shrug, burying my face in the shallow V of her shirt. Just inhaling her warm sweet fragrant scent.

‘You’re my other half, I can trust you.’ Said Nevaeh.

~*~

Strongminded to ignore the way my stomach just dipped when she spoke to me. Having no idea what it means or why I should care if Emmah likes Naddalin and was there first but preferring to push it away, nonetheless.

‘Why?’

Why do you think I should warn her to stay away? It is not like I own her or anything. I was thinking far too much in my mind, now clear and quiet for once, it was odd not having voices in my head, or hearing the soft murmurs of chatter always, that could not be turned off.

‘You know, tell her what she likes?’

My lips pushing into the hollow at the base of her neck, right next to the cord that holds her amulet.

She then shifts, rearranging her limbs, pulling away as Emmah in the background utters.

‘If she is as gifted as you say, then she should be able to read her energy and see for herself, that she is going to kill her for her place, or the other way around, you are both the same, at this point- don’t you see?’

‘Only one of you can live, to keep the other, alive- right? So, I will back down and let you too to it.’ Said Emmah.

She gazes at me, voices vigilant, unhurried, overly controlled in a way I am not used to. ‘Above and beyond that, do we even know what she is like? Or are they all just altered memories of memories?’

From what you have described, we only know her under the influence of Nevaeh and the influences of Naddalin, how can we be sure you are you.

She may be quite nice on her own, yet she was never going to be a girl, like how did this happen?’

Nevaeh starts to babble, in her explanations, over defeating them, said Nevaeh, you are not losing anyone by us being two you are gaining a new friend for life, trust me, and she held out her hand to her.

I squint, trying to imagine a nicer version of Naddalin whom I love with all my life and even gave up mine for hers, but unable to get there, in the spilled thought.

‘But still,’ I say. ‘Naddalin has a habit of falling for all the wrong girls and-’ I stop, meeting her gaze and sense that things have taken a definite turn for the worse, though I’ve no idea why.

Even I was no good for her as you can see... squalled Emmah.

‘You know what? Never mind all that... times change, and so do we, I thank you for everything you have done for me what more can I say or do for you? Said Nevaeh.

‘It is uninteresting and stupid and not worth our time, to hold chips on our shoulders, do not be like them this world is too lovely for so much hate. Fallen or not we all have unity here, let us not fight, I am sick and tired of that.’ Said Naddalin.

Let us talk about something else, okay?’ I leaned toward her, aiming my lips toward the edge of her jaw, expecting the smooth nurtures of her face.

‘Let us talk about something that has nothing to do with everything like life and living past it, and everything that has taken place to live past.

The twins are here- look at them over there waving at us, they met up with Haven and it was a delightful moment. Lots of tears and hugs and catching-up and cheering by the others, yet I still find it all to be so said.

It was said- by others, they both could not live without their sister- it was a double suicide... at the same time- they found them hang in their room face to face stark-naked, and limp, by their mother.

-And-

...And still, kids making fun of the hanging dead on the internet, it was only less than a one-half hour ago, look at them mocking their memory- in their high school- just think about it, in they would have been seniors this year, or about to graduate.

‘So much about the American dream.’ Said Naddalin.

‘The way the world is right now could you say that they may be better off.’ Said Monique Malone, a girl over color, that we know yet do not, not that over her skin color, and with some that are an issue, with us over the fact we do not know her at all, or too many new girls at this point, over trying to exist.

‘Even in the afterlife, you have something dumb as race, making hate.’ Said the girl sweetly, and shyly.

‘This is why, like- I always felt ugly, and was given the education of that of pre-k in life over this skin that I still have, don’t punish me for it.’ Monique said.

‘Sorry to hear that...’ Whispered Nevaeh, saying it with empathy.

‘...Yet don’t you have somewhere to be.’ Said, Kimberly Grant.

And she runs off, discouraged, depressed, blue, and dispirited, in a world that is magical.

Hey, you shit-head, come here, said Nevaeh, yes you come here, she makes an inching index finger moment; and screams, an inch from her nose- ‘F*UCK YOU!’ Only moments pass... ‘You’re here in the same way she is, understands...!!!’

And then, the room went quiet...

The only thing you could hear was the blinking of some of the girls' lashes rubbing together, over their eyes closing.

'Well, that was the show for today's people... so-o..., ' said Emmah.

Nevaeh- Hoping she was more amused than offended by that, she looks at her new girlfriend, and they both get lost in each other's eyes.

'Something that doesn't make me feel quite so old and boring, is you.' And she taps her on the tip of her nose.

Portion

'Are you saying you're bored?' She looks at me, eyes wide, horrified.

'Like- like how can you say that nothing is boring about you or the life that you had.' Alleged Naddalin, in her words.

I lift my shoulders and scrunch my face, wishing I could pretend otherwise, but also not wanting to lie. 'A little.' Yet, I nodded, this moment was perfect.

Emmah- 'I mean, I'm sorry to say it, but the whole cuddling on the divan while the kids sleep upstairs...' I shake my head and walk away.

'It is one thing when you are babysitting, but it is a little creepy when the kids are yours, to still be in love with you, and cannot see why that well never-ever works.

Said, Nevaeh, to Naddalin, who has raised, Emmah.

I mean, I know we are still altering and all-but-well-I guess what I am trying to say is, it is starting to feel like a rut, over hurting others.'

Naddalin- I peer at her, lips pressed tightly together, hesitant, shy, uncertain, along with cautious, and timid, how she will take that, yet love the taste, of the kiss, the feel- the sensations, the cute why of her being ever-so-o playful.

Nevaeh- 'You know how to get out of a furrow, don't you?'

She jumps to her feet so summarily she is a shiny, dark blur, grabbing a camera to keep the moment lost in time, even if that was impossible.

'Photos are such a joke to me anymore...' Whispered Naddalin. There not everlasting... are they, so why take them if we have eternity, and everlasting memories?

'...To remember the good times?'

(The shutter camera clicks, something that I brought into the afterlife going back an apparition.)

'Black and white, of course... nevertheless, you have not changed.' Said Naddalin.

I shake my head, recognizing that look in her eye from where we first met. Way back when things were fun, exciting, unpredictable, random, erratic, and impulsive in every way.

Naddalin- ‘The only escape is to break free.’ She laughs, grasping my hand, and leading me away, to her room.

Portion

The memory of it was whipped out of my mind or I would have thought about it, all along, my Granddaughter would have fought all of this for me, even though that would not be right of me to ask her off, I know that she would have my back, in the other life she was a war hero.

‘I’ll find her and let her know.’ Said Naddalin panting as she rolls over, out of breath in Naveah bed, in her chambers of the castle.

‘Now let us rest, okay...’ they lay side by side.

I follow her through the galley and down all the steps, speculating where she could be taking me since a nice trip to School can be had from the couch, just by looking back into my mind that was her mind.

‘What about the twins and the third that look the same too?’ I whisper. ‘What if they wake and find we’re not here?’ The three of them- triplets are still chatting with Haven, they never got any sleep, did they.

‘None...,’ said Nevaeh.

Naddalin shrugs, leading me around to all her favorite spots and glancing over her shoulder as she says, ‘No worries, everyone else they are sleeping soundly, and all we

need to do is be sneaky, and have some fun for a change. Besides, I have a feeling they will stay that way for a while.'

'...And did you have anything to do with that?' I ask, remembering the time she put the entire student body to sleep-including the administrators and teacher- and I am still not sure how she did it.

She laughs and opens my door, beckoning for me to get in. Nonetheless, I shake my head and stand my ground, saying, 'what if... what if...'

'Come on,' she said, dragging me like by the hand.

She looks at me for a moment, then shakes her head and closes her eyes, brows merging as she manifests, to take me outside, and into the dark woods, always forbidden, yet magical at night, just like the one I all the odd animals making sounds and doing magical things.

Nonetheless, I shake my head again, not need a new brand of fun when the old one will do, and life really needs to slow down some, and it was not long ago she was not even here... it is like she needs to run and be free, and she was dragging me.

So, I close my eyes and wish it away, replacing it with a replica of the shiny girl she was back when she was young letting her have her way, and her memories back, and to share them with me.

‘It was many points taken with me.’ She nods, waving me in with a mischievous grin, as she ran through tall grasses that seemed to glow, and pulsated, throbbed, and beat to very steepness.

She falls, then I next... we lay there... only moments... it felt. Then the next thing I know we are racing down the pathway and onto the street of the town, slowing just enough for the gate to open, and bang- as we run in a blur of speed, to all the look down at us from the French verandas and- stone- style homes and rooms windows in a warm soft glow; street lanterns flickering...

I gaze at her, trying to peer into her mind and see just where we are going, but she just giggles, deliberately establishing- her psychic shield, strongminded to surprise me.

She glances at me as she navigates down the road at near-record speeds with me and said- ‘let us take off for the sky,’ and we did hand in hand.

‘Whatever it takes to get you back in the back to the castle, in one piece, after all, she is kind of a wild child.’ Said Naddalin.

I smile, having listened to the story (many times) of her time spent back home learning inspirational meditation right alongside Lily who betrayed her, and I already know her whole life’s story, yet she loves telling it; and she does it so-o well.

It was a long story, yet I love hearing it over I love her. After taking the flight, it was not long before it was time to be back then greeted by Enola and Eveline, standing on the ground, where they landed and had their feet touch the ground.

If I had demonstrated correctly that they were happy to see up it was not morning, and the sun had come up, and the girls were starting to rise as well.

‘How am I ever going to adapt to the twenty-second century if you’re determined to keep me rooted in the past?’

Nevaeh, she laughs...

Saying ‘well history repeats itself...’

Naddalin- ‘I was kind of hoping you wouldn’t adapt to me as well as you did, I know that you still have feelings for her, and the one before, and she too.’ I mumble, gazing out the window at a blur of darkness depleting to soft light.

‘Change is overrated- or at least your more recent changes are.’ Squalled Naddalin.

It seems to me that you liked me more when I was just the girl in your head, why the change...

Naddalin- ‘It’s real now- and scary,’ she said back.

Nevaeh- ‘So, what are you saying, I am boring?’

Naddalin- ‘No that you’re wearing me out.’ Along with saying, ‘You’re a keeper, that’s for sure.’

I turn toward her, watching as she exits the room and makes a series of sharp turns before climbing the steps out to the main hallways, a very steep ramp, and fades out to shadows in the soft light.

Beforehand stopping in front of a huge limestone sculpture of her, saying God, is that what I look like, shaking my head, they captured my likeness- did not they.'

'Umm,' is all Naddalin said.

Nevaeh continued to bounce down the hallway... and you could hear her hill click.

'What's the hell?'

I squint, knowing I am not alone, I feel something at the back of my neck, and even touch me. Hitherto nothing was there, from the look I gave I was frightened; feeling uneasy about exactly where I was as if disoriented.

She smiles now running back to me, slamming on her on the break with her feet until she is on her tippy toes, jumping out of nowhere to open my door.

'Where have you been, and why did you follow me?' Asked Nevaeh to Naddalin.

I shake my head and avoid her gaze. Walking now down all the art on the wall of girls of the past like a museum it is about the last place I expected- or even wanted to go, yet it was nice to hear even more story to explain an already long story of- I do not care.

Come on, there are things to do, and things to see, do not lie around here.

‘But- isn’t the time or everything to be closed, or closing down for the night?’

Along with saying harshly- ‘I am- pooped girl, you’re wearing me out!’

I glance around, sensing we are the only ones here, other than the armed guards who are positioned inside.

‘You don’t need anyone to have fun you got me, and I have you!’ Said Nevaeh.

‘Close the door and let me take a nap!’ Said Naddalin even more grumpy.

She looks at me and shakes her head; ‘you think I’m going to leave something or something as routine as them saying we can’t stop us from doing what we want?’

‘Guards, and be told to not do so, has been a pain in my butt all my life, so-o.’

‘‘So-o!’ ‘So, I am not going to stand for it, any longer.’

‘Come on!’

She slips her arm around me and leads me up and out of the room and my feet are shuffling on the stone steps, lips at my ear when she adds me to look around, yet I can barely keep my eyes open.

Nevaeh- ‘You know there is no rest for the fallen and the dead!’

Nevaeh- 'I know an art center, not your first choice, but trust me, I am about to prove a particularly good point, why I think it something worth seeing. One that, from what you just said, clearly needs illustrating.'

'You'll be happy to see this...'

'I don't want to go; I want to sleep!!!'

'What, come on!'

~*~

They walk in and it was nothing, but Naddalin childhood artwork displayed.

~*~

'You did all this for me didn't you...?' Asked Naddalin.

'Yeap!' Said Nevaeh.

Nevaeh- 'Over one hundred of your art-peace's.'

Naddalin- 'Oh, my God, thank you!' She said hugging her.

'...You know more about art than I do?' Said Naddalin.

'That is why I did this, I always thought you were so good.'

She stops, her face serious when she says, 'I am going to prove, that this world really needs to know who you are with this artwork.'

Nevaeh- 'Go on... walk around this is your playground.'

‘Whatever we want them to be, that is the message your work well gives them, and at any time, you have the right to change these to what is in your mind’s eye, and magically they will start to animate, and tell the story you want them too.’

-And then-

‘...And then... like they well see a story too in their mind, and it will be added too... to the artwork painting itself out for them to their perspective, also in their style or medium they wish.’

There is no need to ever feel bored or to get into a rut once you understand that the normal rules no longer apply- to you or us... or at least not for us, and even some we choose. Just like this artwork, it always changes making it perfect now for our minds and theirs.

We can do anything we want, anything, anything at all, you and I like. And you are what I needed most true love to end this hex.

Locked, unlocked, open, closed, unwelcome- welcome, none of it matters, we do what we want when we want. There is nothing or no one who can stop you and me.’

With me, you have the world... Said Nevaeh.

‘Yet you own me?’ Whispered Naddalin.

‘Like at one time you owned me...’ Held Nevaeh.

‘I own you!’

Portion

Not entirely true, I think, ruminating on the very thing we have never been able to do in the past four hundred years, which, of course, is the one thing I want us to do.

Nonetheless, she just smiles, kissing me on the forehead before grasping my hand, leading me to the door as she says, ‘Besides, there is a show- a play in the town theatres, that I am dying to see, and since there is no crowd, it should not take long. And I promise, after, we can go wherever you want.’

‘Even sleep yet thank you for everything.’ Said Naddalin.

I for one gaze at the magnificent locking door rigged with the most technological alarms, in our world, that are rigged to other computerized alarms, that are surely rigged to a machine gun-wielding guards, with their fingers already itching to fire... to the point you are at last death, just itching to press the trigger, to feel the evil of on more kill; sick how some in this mysterious world have become over- HER.

‘Even in death and in this peaceful mysterious, dark, and cagy world there is corruption.’ Said Naddalin.

‘I know that all too well, yet, I will take care of it all soon.’ Said Nevaeh.

‘Sooner than later...’ she said.

Then at that very moment, she cast her wand made a chant and a spell over the land and all the neighboring towns, to put an end to all the heat, on others, and to bring back a feeling of love, to all even in a murky world.

‘Heck, there’s probably a hidden camera trained on us now, even though every eye looking at us is the same way- others seeing into you like never before, seeing into us, and having no privacy what-so-ever...’

(Paranoia) is the life all these girls and the towns around here feel...

‘I’m going to change all that!’ she said in a muttering tone.

‘Good for you for being so-o strong.’ Said Naddalin to Nevaeh.

Nevaeh- ‘...And I amuse there is a horse draw guard carnage somewhere, is racing towards us now, with ready to push the panic button guardsmen ready to attack; for you and me, wanting to have a clear mind, and turn our minds off to the world.’

‘It is so peaceful not to have the humming chatter of nonentity running through your head always- I know they mean well, yet there needs to be a mute, to everything personal.’

‘Don’t you think?’

‘I do.’ Though Naddalin back, who were still sharing minds at this point, yet only their minds.

This is the first thing I am going to have written back into law, is ‘The Peace-of-Mind Act.’

‘Are you seriously going to try and break everything in one night?’

I gulp- palms damp, hand on my still heart that should be clattering against my chest, wanting to feel. I was hoping she was lighthearted even though she is not at all.

‘No,’ she whispers, closing her eyes and urging me to close mine. ‘I am not going to try, I am going to succeed, you just watch me. You just need to start believing in yourself, and even I have had moments where I was completely disloyal to myself.

And if you do not mind, you could help me along the way with this plan by standing by me, and together you can make me even stronger, every step along the way. Now close your eyes and following my lead, you will see everything laid out before you in the darkness, yet you get the whole picture in your mind, and you see it all.’

Naddalin- ‘It’s wonderful how you want to help, all of them even when they did want to stand behind you.’ Along with saying ‘I ask why?’

~*~

Leaning even nearer to me- Nevaeh, Naddalin’s lips at my ear when she adds, I am there for you every step of the way.

‘And I the ability, no one gets caught, hurt, or imprisoned. I mean this- ‘cross my heart, or I will die for the last time- I swear to you and them- and they are too.’

I peer at her, declaring that someone who has lived for 100 hundred years has survived her share of predicaments. That she had life all figured out.

Then I take a deep breath and plummet in. Copying the series of steps, she envisages until the doors spring open, the feelers turn off, and the guards all fall into a long deep sleep. And the order is replacing with a long-lasting came to all of freedom.

‘I have done it their all free, form the feeling of wicked, malevolent, sinful, malicious, criminal, and evil!’

‘ELSE... Else at least I hope it is long and deep. Long and deep would be good, they feel something... something that I have made them feel...,’ said Nevaeh.

‘You have completely lost your mind... she said shaking her head.’

‘Ready...?’ She stares at me, lips curving into a grin.

I hesitate, hands shaking, eyes scurrying, thinking that rut we were in is starting to look good, to what she has planned to take over this world.

‘You’re planning on being the most powerful magician- angel and girl-wizard to ever live ant’ you?’

At that moment, I swallow hard and step with her into the porthole to another time- and place- as she has made a change for the best, recoiling me into it, as my elastic sole meet hers, and was pulled out of time, even more, she took me to a place where there is polished stone floor, resulting in the most high-pitched, screechy, cringe-worthy sound, of fallen girls at work, and a world where the towns are free to clean and contented.

‘What do you ponder?’ She says, faces enthusiastic, keen, fervent, and excited, hoping I am enjoying myself as much as her.

‘Ah-ha, so now I’ll have to kill you if I want to become this powerful, won’t I?’ she said in a malicious voice.’

There were just staring eyes looking at her... Nevaeh did not say or make a sound.

‘I considered taking you to school and making you in charge of everything, as I make my climb to fame, and take over the Bureau of magic, and take the head office, and Marva.’

Naddalin- ‘Well you have earned it!’

Naddalin- ‘I... best- not joke, then.’ She said moments after.

Nevaeh- ‘You were joking right?’

Naddalin- ‘You’ll never- ever know’ As she takes her arm around her back.

‘I love your sarcasm.’ She mumbles.

But then again, I figured that is exactly what you would do, I expect it, I did. Said Naddalin.

‘So, I decided to show you the magic as it should be, working for me for a change, I am staying right here, and you can look after Earth as a replacement for becoming what I longed for all along- beloved.’

I- Naddalin look at her new headquarters, and I nod, still about as far from excited I am that I could be yet trying to hide it. Scoping out the ginormous room with its

tall ceilings, glass windows, and a plethora of corridors and halls, which makes it incredibly bright and welcoming in the daytime, I know that we would never be spending time together and like all, before me, I am being used for the allotment goal here power.

The day passes, and I am left to be by myself until nightfall as she is lost in work- work- work; it was the creepiest of nights the kind that nightmares are made of, I was lost to the eeriness of having nothing but the sound silence, quiet, stillness in my head, and it was almost deafening, and given me the feeling of vertigo. She has done it, even get her new white robes of wizardry, gray wings behind tipped the blood of the fallen in red beside rubies or red too, the robe and her covered in suitable gems of wealth and allotment power.

Portion

(A year has passed)

‘Come- in,’ Naddalin is said in a strong- yet mind driven why, of trite.

Naddalin, she nods, heading for the round desk in the center, with a chair facing out the windows, rocking.

Then, she said is... ‘This reminds me of being home when I was becoming an older woman, looking out over my land, and pathway and the town of in the fare distances, only lit by path lanterns. Do you believe that history repeats?’

‘The place is huge, and I have not seen you in a year...’ She said with concern and wonder, alike.

‘You have not been here before...?’ she said with a quiver in her voice and tone. Then with moments of lost in thoughts, like someone that was in pandemonium, of delirium or Requiem.’

She spins around- ‘Sh-h’ she said having her index finger over my lip.’

‘Nevaeh!’

...?...

She looked at me all color drained from her eyes, ‘What has happened to you?’

...?...

There were no sounds...

Interval: 5

The Lingering

Portion

Nevaeh- ‘This was my given title when I was in the Haven’s and not here... it’s there to remind me, that I was so good to all.’

‘Now I am God here and a woman!’ Said Nevaeh.

‘You still are good to all, what are you saying.’ Said Naddalin.

‘Yet as you were saying... before...’

‘I was saying that I was here once before, right before this all officially opened, I saw you, and then you never- ever spent any time with me from that day on. And though I know there is lots of important work you are doing, you forgot about all that you were to see- with me.

‘Well, you did not seem the slightest bit interested in me at all, and all you wanted to do is sleep, so now you can, you made it clear, that you did not want to sightsee with me; so-o...

There is one exhibit that I am extremely interested in, you want to come?’

‘No, you have fun.’

She swipes a guest guard standing off to the side- protecting Nevaeh, I hired hand holding a gun, Naddalin was now pressing her palms to the top of Nevaeh’s desk until the expected feeling came over her to go, as the guards' gun was tapping her backside.

‘Yet, you will trust them and not me? Ha.’ She spoke.

The location appears in her head yet was lost to be there only, no longer linked up with her anymore. A moment of sadness came over Naddalin and her face.

She pulled a book for the shives, then dropping it back in its slot, looking for the right one, she drops the first copy of her work, saying I want to keep this to remember me by, (I pick it up) as she leads me down a series of halls and up a few stairs, our path lit

only by a series of flickering lights and the glint of the moon shining in through the many arched windows.

‘Is this really what you want or are you being contoured now?’

I ask, watching as she stands before a luminous painting titled The Guardian Angel Rachmiel holding a baby girl, body still with awe, expression transformed into one of pure bliss.

She nods, unable to speak as she takes it all in, struggling to compose herself before revolving to me. ‘I have traveled a lot, I have seen all, now it is time to sit and reflect.

‘This is not like you- what gives?’ Said Naddalin.

‘I have lingered in many places.’ Said Nevaeh.

‘Her mafia has ahold over you, don’t they?’ Squalled Naddalin.

Naddalin- Nonetheless, when I finally left, I thought that completely. Italy just over four centuries ago, was the same idea and where I was going to escape to for some R and R, this was the last time, I was going to ask. I was going to linger in the mind of a young girl that needed me, that I would be taking on as my new project, that required a guarded angel, that was living the lifestyle on earth, I never had yet wanted to with her, yeah-no, doing the romantic Venetian Gondola Rides my-self, and live in a city that was on the water edge. I swore I would never return. And this would be the last time that she would ever see me.

The rebirth was over, and she needed me- not- so any longer, and my life- well- was complete too, I was more than ready to move on- and live life... All I wanted to do at this point was to live life... even lost in someone else's, I just wanted to live.

Even so, then I heard about the new school of artists also and knew this was for me too, for her- Melisa age 12 to get her life on track too, the Cristello family was going to be my new home away from home, she had learned the craft from the masters, including my dear friend Lyndsey Dahl, who was fallen and to has moved on to a new project in the same parts, so I would not be alone, in a year a lot can change even me, I made new friends- I had to keep sane.

‘They started a new way of painting, influencing the next generation of artists.’

(One-week letter and Naddalin was starting to settle in.)

She motions to the painting before us, I am inside, face filled with wonder as she delicately, sympathetically, and kindly shakes her head.

Naddalin- ‘Just look at the textures and the softness!’ Then saying moments after- ‘The strength of color and light!’

She heebie-jeebies her head. ‘It’s just dazzling!’ She says voice tinted with respect, admiration, worship, and awe of appreciation.

I glance between the painting and her reflection- back in me, looking through the same set of eyes, wishing I could see it in the same way as her, and in a way, I do- it all perspective, a viewpoint, and belvedere.

Not as some old, inestimable, highly regarded picture hanging before me, but as a true thing of beauty, an object of glory, a miracle of general.

She leads me to the next one, our hands grasped one on top of the other even if both hers the feeling is one to the other, as we marvel at a painting Claude Monet, her poor, pale body pierced with tears in her artery and arrows in her eyes- all of it appearing so real, I flinch- to her true feelings.

And that is when I get it. For the first time, I can see what Naddalin sees, we were linked, mind, body, and soul.

Finally understanding that the true journey of all great art is in taking an isolated experience and not just preserving it, or interpreting it, but sharing it for all time.

‘You must feel so-’ I shake my head and press my lips together, searching for just the right word.

‘I do not know- influential, commanding, authoritative, prevailing, and controlling - I guess. To be able to create something as beautiful as what we now have, art in a way is coming together.’

I peer at her- looking back through the same eyes, knowing she can without difficulty create work with as much beauty and meaning as those that hang here, and it lingers when it has done and is long-lasting.

Nonetheless, she just shrugs, moving on to the next one, and I felt it all, as she says, ‘Other than our art class at school, I have not painted in years, even if I am said to be one of the best, I have lost all belief in myself.

I have the presumption I am more of an appreciator than a creator now. And my art is no longer good to me...’

‘But why- that was the true question?’

‘Why would you turn your back on a gift like that?’

I asked my first question, I asked in her head where she unambiguously thought she had lost her mind, even though I have all control.

I mean, it is a gift, right? There is no way it can be an immortal thing since we’ve all seen what happens when I try to paint.’

She leers- lost in her on the thought that was no longer hers, leading me across the room and discontinuing before a magnificent rendition called her parents, and she was no longer yours truly.

Contemplation searching every square inch of the canvas when she says, justly?

Influential with a feeling of supremacy does not even begin to describe how I feel with a brush in my hand, blank canvas before me, and a full palette of paint by my side. Though Naddalin. And Melisa agreed unanimously to that thought.

(Time to go home)

For many years I have been invincible, sheer to the elixir sought by all men, and not able to take it down easily!’ And that is what I would call dad, after settling in for the night.

My thought was going through her ha- hum routines, he was old fished- and strict and wanting far too much for his child, also making her feel the worthless feeling of losing out on the joys of life.

She shakes her head, shames, and lies naked on the floor, she gets shuffling to the door under only my power of movement for her.

I knew this all too well also... she was my new mission.

While Nevaeh was playing GOD.

~*~

‘And yet nothing can rival the farfetched rush the act of creation brings, even now it is a rush of feeling guilty. Of crafting something you just know is meant to be great for all time, and a moment that should be so different, always the same with me- and now her too.’

‘I understand her life and I have only been here a day, it’s all the same, all girls know when life take yours.’

Portion

I- Naddalin, like had even a deeper thought that was locked out from her mind, and was haunting in just mine, I remember when my dad was talking about me becoming a woman- as a little girl still to him, and what that meant and what you had to do, and that it was nicer if you save it for the right man- and marriage, and I was an only 12-year-old girl; then it was creepy now it awe-sticking to see it in return, to appreciate what he meant to me. ‘Honey, odd to me in its wonder, (head shaking side to side) hum- soon you’ll be a mother.’

‘Yet that never happened... he never got it, and neither did I.’

She turned toward me, hand at my cheek, and he kissed saying, ‘you always be mine- my something special and my always little girl.’

(Snapping out of it)

Then my cat ran and then jumped up on me on my lap, she was all I brought back with me from my world to her, was my cute little fuzzy- pussy- kitty cat named Valentine, that what all girls need when feeling low, I remember my kitty- so-o. The cat hides my true body within her.

‘Or at least that is what I believed up until I saw you. Because seeing you for the very first time-’ She shakes her head, eyes gazing into mine. ‘Nothing can ever compare with that very first glimpse of our love.’

‘You didn’t stop painting for me- why did you?’

I held my breath- only slightly, hoping I was not the cause of her artistic demise, yet I had the thought that I was.

She shakes her head, gazes returning to the painting before her, that she was working on after many mounts of suppression and deepening thoughts, as her thoughts travel- to me in a link that is faster than light, a long way away- I add my feeling in to.

‘It had nothing to do- and no friends, and it all over you- she said on the inside and then out- so we all felt the blame.’

The spiritual painting was dark, ethereal, otherworldly, ethereal spectral, wraithlike, and unearthly showing a girl angel, that was covered in blood, in a black and gray world.

Naddalin as Melisa- saying in a voice that is the same yet slightly hinting with hers, yet undetectable ‘this is a self-portrait, showing what is inside of me coming out, don’t you all see, that this is not madness this me being controlled.’

‘Little did she know- it was my hand, that painted it!’

‘And those things in this world we cannot explain come for us within them lingering. It is just- well- at some point, the reality of my situation set in, that I was part of her and she- me and there was nothing she could do about it I owned her.’

As Melisa's dad- I squinted, having no idea what that means, or what she could conceivably- be getting at.

‘A cruel reality I probably should’ve shared with you before.’ She sighs, looking at me.

I gaze at her, stomach filling with dread, unsure I want to hear the answer when I ask- in her thoughts only, ‘What do you mean, she asked?’ Not understanding what the thought meant.

Sensing from the look in her eyes just how much she is struggling with- the wonders.

There is no way I was going to kill her to take her back with me now... death was not the way out for this girl.

‘Hum what to do?’ I thought to myself and myself only.

‘The reality of living forever, aren’t they’ she says, eyes dark, sad, focused on mine, lost in my thought as if she knows I am there by now.

‘A reality that seems incredibly vast, infinite, and powerful, your part of are not you, with no limits in sight- until you realize the truth lurking behind it, is that death is the only way to get there, the truth of watching your friends, all leave you, it is all you in my head making this happen, it all you... all wither and die while you stay the same, and all the storms end and you in a way play destiny, making the changing patterns.

Only you are involuntary to watch it from afar like, because once the discrimination becomes obvious, you’ve no choice but to move on, to go somewhere new and start over again- or to end. And again. And again- start and end.’

Naveah- The oddest thing, even in my new-found love of power, overall, there was one thing I still never found, and that was my first boyish love- Chiaz, and to this day I do not even have a picture of him, he only lives in my memory. He was in whole other leaves of our world, higher than I will ever be again.

Nevaeh- then at that moment shakes her head, letting the thoughts go, week feeling now than ever, even as the strongest she has ever been in her world.

All of which makes it impossible to kindle any real bonds. Yet she was making a friend in her head she knew it and someday maybe even more...

Then the caustic thing is, notwithstanding our limitless access to powers and magic, the lure to make a significant impact or consequence any real change is something that must be evaded at all costs. It is the only way to remain hidden, with our secrets unbroken.

~*~

Chiaz- 'Since-' I cajole, wishing she would stop being so puzzling and just get to the point, that she has completely lost her damn mind.

She makes me so nervous when she starts talking like that, I remember this in the past, I just thought that it was the same thing happening then as I do now.

'Because drawing that kind of attention guarantees that your name and image will be recorded in history, something of which we must work to avoid. Only if you remember as the girl who went mad.'

‘Because while everyone around you will grow old and die, Haven, Emmah, Jaylynn, and so on, and yes, even Kristen, too- and you will stay the same, if you do not lose your mind, and let them in...’ Said Chiaz, also.

Entirely unchanged, you are completely the same girl you were when I met you all those years back, still takes my breath away, and I still LOVE you! And cannot... until this day over them... no more... NO MORE I SAY.’

And, trust me, it does not take long before people start to notice how you have not changed a bit since the day you first met. We cannot run the risk of being recognized fifty years from now by a seventy-year-Old Haven. Cannot afford the risk of having our secret revealed.’

Nevaeh- He then grabs hold of my wrists, gazing at me with such intensity, I feel the weight of his longing, and in a way, it takes me back to that time as if I snapped out it.

Chiaz- Besides, like always, when she is troubled, my only wish is to show I always cared- and was understanding to her cerebral intellectual sickness, and always realized that she was just a mad genius.

Portion

‘Can you even begin to imagine if Jaylynn, or Haven, or Emmah discovered the truth about us? Can you imagine what they would think, what they would say, what they would do? That is why people like Naddalin and Haven are so dangerous to you and

your mind- they exhibit what they are, and you completely ignore the ordinary order of things, and subjecting your- own realities.’ Said Chiaz.

‘Make no mistake, ever,’ is what I must deal with, you of all should know that. Said Nevaeh.

‘The cycle of life is there for a reason, and you cannot change that, even if you cannot adapt, let it go, let it go!’ That is what he said to me.

‘That is where you’re wrong, so wrong, and while I may have sneered at that in my youth, feeling quite full of myself for rising above it, I no longer do.’ Held Nevaeh.

Besides, in the end, there is no fighting it. Whether you reawaken like our friends or remain the same as us, you are just a lost soul in lost time, your vibes, karma, atmosphere, aura, ambiance, and feeling will always catch up in the end as they did, why because you are different than them, you are higher your better.

Chiaz- ‘And now that I’ve experienced both higher and lower levels of this world, I will come down here to stay with you if you say you give up this madness.’

‘No.’ Is all she said.

‘I’m even more convinced that life as fauna envisioned it, is the only way, and I have to be there to oversee it all- understand.’

‘Go back I say... and you don’t love me, do you?’

‘But- if that is what you believe- then- believe it, where does that leave us, enemies? ...And if you think that your nuts.’

I ask, a chill encasing my skin, despite the warmth of her hands, at this point saying it is over, it was over many years ago when he passed before me.

‘I callous, to hear you say it, we should lay low, and just live for ourselves, rather than using our farfetched supremacy for any real change, should we not?’ he said sarcastically.

-And-

‘Besides how can that perchance- help your karma if you do not use your gifts to help others? She said, "Now I ask why you are there, and I am here, just like everything else I fail to understand.’

She then adds a moment’s letter- ‘Exclusively if you do so incognito?’

Thinking of Haven and my hopes of helping her, thinking about this one and that one is why you are here, look at you and did you help them?

‘How dare you- HOW DARE YOU- COME INTO MY PLACE, and say that? What gives you the right?’

Even so, before I can finish, Naddalin’s already shaking her head, looking at me when she says, ‘Where does that leave us? Precisely where we are?’

She makes a gesticulation... in a shocking fashion.

‘Forever, together...’

‘So-o, as long as we’re actual, incredibly careful and continue to wear our charms, that is, you feel that you’re immortal.’ Said Chiaz.

‘Above and beyond as for using our powers, we all can do that, why you, why do you feel as if you’re the chosen one?’ He said moments later.

Chiaz- Well, I am fearful it is much more byzantine than simply righting all wrongs, isn’t it?

While we may magistrate things as good or bad, the feeling of right and wrong does not. It is a simple case of like gets like, the final balancing act, nothing more, nothing less.

Beyond all that, like- if you are strong-minded to fix every situation you deem as bad, or difficult, or somehow disagreeable, then you rob the person of their chance to fix it, learn from it, or even grow from it, and the same with you. You are taking your time in the afterlife, to change others, when it is not up to you to make life-changing decisions.

-And-

‘No matter how painful, everything happens for a reason,’ your words not mine.

A reason you or I may not be able to grasp at first sight, over may be looking too hard or not at all, also your words, not without knowing a person's entire life story-their snowballing past. It also sounds like you, or the old you.

'Well, the old me can't talk to you....,' said Nevaeh.

'Why not?' asked Chiaz.

'Well... ...?... She is dead!'

Portion

Chiaz- 'Besides to just rush in and interfere, no matter how kindly, would be like robbing them of their journey. Moderately that has better not done right?'

'So-o, let me get straight.' An edge creeping into my voice I do not try to hide. 'Haven comes to me and says; my cat is dying; would you spare her life? And Nevaeh places her hands on the cat and in a surge of energy sparks flew from her palms, and a renewed life is given to what is now a kitten.

'Christ, it's a freaking miracle it's magical,' said Haven.

'I have become the Christ of our world, I am God.' Said Nevaeh in a rowing way.

'You have lost your mind.' He said to me in my face, so close I could smell the breath.

‘Oh, just say the only reasons why you loved me was for my tight little puss- and ass slam fitting perfectly into your lap, during, I may look fourteen, yet I not fourteen anymore, and sex is not- love.’

‘Say it, Chiaz, say it I am right, I know that I am...’

‘Look and you think you’re so divine now, you have had all your past teachers sent to a firing squad- and a bloodbath of them being executed at POINT BLANK RANG sight in the front of the head.’

Then he went on to say...

‘I am not going to say that we loved each other, did we?’ He spoke.

‘That was then, and this is now, and this is life or final death.’ She spoke.

Also, even though I am indisputable, I can fix it, I do not because it would result in too many inquiries that I could never- ever explain and draw undue doubt.

‘Okay, I get it, I will go yet this is the last time you’ll ever see me, remember that.’ He said, ‘along with remembering the fact you don’t like to live with guilt, so think again before you turn me away.’

Then he went on to say muttering out the doorway, ‘Really and you’re the girl that thought the devil lived in her vagina as a child... and you’re the smart one and the master of all.’

‘I don’t like it, but I get it, you may be right- you just may.’ She said with a one-sided smile.

Nevaeh said, (ash to ash dust to dust) and Chiaz at once spontaneously combusted into flames- and was left to be nothing but dust, he never got away- with what he said to her did he?

‘He does not even have wings yet, not much of a man, is he? Not even those of Heavenly, weak, and pathetic.’ A tear ran down her cheek, and she turned around to go back to be behind her large desk and oversized chair.

There was caring yet no love.

Portion

(Naddalin as Melisa)

But when she says, my parents might be divorcing- she finally got her grips back in her mind talking me down, I might have to move- she thought in my mind that was also her linked together, and it feels like my entire world is yielding in telling me the with no inkling whatsoever that I’m in a perfect position to help her- I was unable, to maybe even converse some of those things by taking over her mind, body, and soul- yet, I have the rights to go with- still- I don’t know if I choose to be wise.’

I shrug for her inside, her body lost inside like a cold winter's night, feeling unfulfilled now and more than angry.

‘But anyway, my point is, something like that happens to our good friend and you are telling me I cannot help?

‘I want her to stay alive as long as possible even if the mission is to take her life...’

That gave me three things I could do.

- As they want me to, take her back down with me to the castle, to be with all the other girls like her.
- Stay in her body even though her soul is mine, lost and lingering, to do the above when I feel ready.
- Or keep her alive... and be a friend as much as possible to her, and NOT be a fraud and a phony, like her- and them and even they too.

Because it would confuse her voyage or her ambiance, or whatever to take her when is not the matter? Said Naddalin- in the body of this young sweet innocent young lady.

I mean, explain to me how that helps my ambiance, of what I am, by keeping the things to myself it is her life and I am not God and do not plan to play pretend like some- and we all know who she is, and why I do not want to be like her any longer.’ I advise myself to not get involved over the fact of that,’ she says muttering to herself in inchoateness’.

(Back)

(Sad times back home, reports coming in of revaluation in France.)

1

2042- When I woke up it was cold like the haunting type of day with low light and the feeling of fog. The other side of the bed is cold like me inside and this world that I live in. Her fingers spring out, and then tighten, seeking Melisa temperateness, LIKEWISE, finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress, I am there by her side she is afraid, that she is going to be the one, the one that is chosen to combat.

‘It was a yearning to burn, all the books all that was wisdom, all that was history, art, love, religion, and even sex was now questioned- at direct gunpoint.’

The computers and robots ‘impressions’ of life have taken over the world, nobody needs to read any of that shit, or think. Everything is at our fingertips with cell phones, I pad,’ and PCs, without looking through old dusty pages, plus its agents the law to think for yourself, and read any books. We burn books like most have the burning itch to have unprotected sex.’

Like me she was thinking about how she might be the one girl in our town, that must give her freedom up to fight in this war, like all of us girl in our bunker, a girl school if you well, we all are having this like bad dream all the same dream how does that work? No mom’s or dad’s no boys, so not cool for a girl that is a pre-teen yet wants to feel what love is- we were all ripped away for how we are the girls with the stars in our arms and known by a number.

Unquestionably, she did- thinking she would be the one called out to do this task, yet so did I- like so did all of us. This is the day of the acquiring of being a woman of my type, a girl that is not what is called the right race. Were we having to go down in our numbers of what is not Permitted to the trooper's want and that man that has power over us all?

She pulls the covers back over and I am now in the same bed with her not allowed yet she is my little sister... what are they going to do, drag me out of the room and put a gun in my hand and kill me like they did my other older sister, last night? Just kill me, and get it over with... to I said, I live in a room with 100 girls, where you can even shit without a man or them looking at you are doing just that, sleeping with one open, to say the least... I must which what I say now, or... (You are not prompted to say what go one within the walls.)

The voice in the air said. I fart they could kill me for that also! I want to see hare for the last time before we are off... before the round is chosen. I am here to see the look in her eyes of bloody fear, as she is me... we all feel this way... for the next day. She hugs me knowing that she is safe.

I prop myself up on one elbow. There is enough light in the bedroom to see them. My little sister, Melisa curled up on her little side she is no more they four feet, brown hair green eyes, sheltered under the privacy of the covers, nervous body and nightgown were there that was all we had on all that is allowed at night, short and loose-fitting.

The left side of her face forced to my chest some of it showing yet I did not care, you stop caring about that with a girl doing what she next to us, you are going to die anyway why not have your fantasy lover in your head.

Hugged tighter- and tighter together, before don where we are going to be ripped apart for what we may not know- being forever. She is now asleep, not me- she looks like me- LIKEWISE, younger, the brown hair is what they odium about she and I. Look at us worn LIKEWISE, not so beaten- down, me more than her... for I am older, I think. My sister's face is as rosé as raindrops fall hard out the windows with the bars being all the keeps the cold out, as lovely as my sister- rose- for which she was named- on a day like this when she was born.

My mother was incredibly beautiful once, too. Or so they tell me... (You can say that I

hear the voice say out yet this time it was in my mind, they have found a way to do that too.)

2

She wakes up to go pee, and they would not let her, so she goes off on the floor by the bed, she could be killed for that... I say she going to go... you can stop her. Now she is sitting on her knees, yet I am guarding her like I am the world to her and the other way around. Pulverized-in muzzle up faces her lips like touching mine her nose on mine, wimping in her ear I was saying- words that would help or so I thought- missing was her

mom- someone that was killed in front of her eyes seven days years ago, eyes color faded like when you lose a life and pass on, she had that feeling, I am sure of that fact.

She was talking about being a kid, and what that was like before all this bull shit happened. Melisa named her Punches, maintaining that she black, brown, and white like a coat that I have that is full of holes, she was bright and blooming like a bright flower in spring at home, in France.

That cat dislikes me, yet I do not mind her, or at least distrusts me, that something I have felt a lot in my life, not being liked. Unlike my sister, even though it was years ago, he still remembers how I tried to drown her in a pot for something to eat. We were those poor things to the troopers, that took all that we were and were away from us.

And even then, my sister still loved me- she knew I was doing what I had to. I recall when she brought him home, as a pet and not something that was food on the table- hell we did not even have that... Just a kitten, belly puffy with maggots, crawling with fleas.

The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed. Likewise, Melisa begged so hard, cried even, I had to let him stay. It turned out okay, even the maggot off cats... and so well she- I have even eaten the occasional rat run up my leg in my bed- raw.

Sometimes, when I clean a kill, I feed LIKEWISE, Teacup the entrails. He has stopped hissing at me. The hair on my legs keeps us girl warm- looks good now to be all hair? No hissing... I well bit you back and not even think about it... I loved cats,

LIKEWISE, food is food. I feel one day, I will come upon a loved one of mine motionless against a wall or lying in the Grazing land, you hear the wails from a house, and the X armed forces are called in to repossess the body. Malnourishment is never the cause of death officially. It is always the flu, or exposure, or pneumonia.

Likewise, then again that fools no one... Starvation Is not particularly rare of fate in these parts of 14. Who has not seen the dupes? Older people who cannot work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Those injured in the mines are left on the mud outside the shaft to pass on. Struggling through the streets, are ended with warfare.

3

This is the gigantic chamber we will ever come to love, for the love of die is less painful than living in the camp. I swing my legs off the bed reaching for my issued boots. Lithe leather that has molded my feet. I pull on trousers, a dress, tuck my hair up and out, my long 2 drown braid down my chest, and grab my silage bag. I was asked to do what I must, so we last until were called out- I think back on days that pass- On the table before it was blown up- under a wooden bowl to protect it from hungry rats and cats alike, sits a perfect little rabbit shit balls wrapped in rosemary leaves.

Melisa gift to me on earning a day. I put the cheese carefully in my pocket as I slipped outside, which was on the rat tarp hoping not to snap it down on my middle finger, and I need that as a girl- you know.

4

My father had been killed in the mine accident three months earlier in the bitterest February anyone could remember this if they wanted- LIKEWISE, they do not care. The numbness of his loss had passed, and the pain would hit me out of nowhere, photocopying me over, racking my body with sobs. Where are you? I would cry out in my mind all the time- it was harder for her being so young. My mom was lost in space for days after... not saying anything to anyone... or us so Melisa and I were taking care of ourselves. When all she did was lay in bed with vibrations pulsating going on, her thoughts they said were with him.

The Borough had given us a small amount of money as compensation for his death, enough to cover one month of grieving at which time my mother would be expected to get a job. Only she did not. She did not do anything LIKEWISE, sitting propped up in a chair or, more often, huddled under the blankets on her bed, eyes fixed on some point in the distance. Occasionally, she would stir, get up as if moved by some urgent purpose, only to then collapse back into stillness. No amount of pleading from My sister seemed to affect her.

Our part of region 14, nicknamed the purlieu, is usually crawling with coal miners heading out to the morning shift at this hour. People with bent over shoulders, swollen knuckles, and skinned backs and knees, many who have long since stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails, the lines of their sunken faces.

Nonetheless today the gloomy streets are empty and barren. Shutters are a brown window, row homes on the squat, and now graying color houses closed shop underneath. The earnings of those who are chosen are not until five P.M. May as well

sleep on the only day now being here where we were allowed to do as we wanted, a reward they called for knowing that we are brave enough today for our area.

Mom is only nineteen... just so you know, we all have kids young... for some man take us as there's. It is just how it works here. I have already been had. Yet my dad killed him for this... there is no law saying you can or cannot.

5

Our house is at the edge of the Ridge. I only must pass a few towns to reach the unkempt field called the Grazing Lands. Separating the Grazing land from the woods that are all burnt for the warfare, in fact circling all of quarter 14, is a high wood fence topped with barbed-wire loops. In theory, it is supposed to be electrified twenty-four hours with which man on towers, train dropping off more girls, girls-only here and man that wants us to be dead, a day as a deterrent to the predators that live in the woods- packs of wild dogs want to lick and bit at are hills- streets are like infertile.

Even so, I always take a moment to listen carefully for the hum that means the fence is live, I sometimes try to see the boys' side, over there if I can, some of us girls try to run the face, there are ways. Right now, it is silent as a stone and some of us went for it, all we could do is be killed- so what- I do not want to die a virgin. Hidden by a clump of bushes, we dash, I flatten out on my belly and slide under a two-foot stretch that has been loose by the time before.

There are several other weak spots in the fence that have been penetrated, LIKEWISE, this one is so close, out of the bathroom showers where the girls made a way out, I always enter the woods here, not caring if I have anything on or not.

6

We girls clam trees, to see if we can see into the boys' rooms, and then they give us a wavy saying it all clear and we make the run for it, sometimes- I feel like why they risk their lives for us- just once, a girl just needs it in more.

I re-claimed a bow, which I made to fight them off me, I had it headend, so if I light on fire, I have something to send back, behind hollow log we wait it out. The Electrified fence in the way or not we were getting there and getting a boy tonight- it was the last time we might, the fence has been up-and-coming at keeping the carnivores out of quarters of 14.

Inside the timbers, they roam freely, and there are added concerns like venomous snakes, rabid animals, and no real paths to follow of deer and bear. The boys also give us the things we need other than love at night- food is an important thing for where we are as thin as it could be.

Good, my sister had to suck on my nipple just for something to eat... that how sad things are here... were not allowed to have a baby, mine killed the day I came here when I was kicked in the gut, saying we do not need any more of your kind. It was for nine months.

Look at that place over there- like E-block no running water just a trickle, out of a hand pump no lights- nothing LIKEWISE, your thoughts of the girls on the other side, and betting it is their life, and working as slaves for the troopers. Then again there's also food if you know how to find it.

My father knew this was all going to happen, I recall them rushing in, we were in the addict with a trap door, I flashback about how he taught me some before he was blown to bits by a pistol go at his hand in a bang. There was nothing even to bury. I was eleven then and still am. Five years later, I still woke up screaming for him to run.

So- my sister is ten, I worry if a ten-year-old could fight till death in this war as a young girl, and then I look at me and know; I am not as strong. I keep having been feeling that she or I would be called out and I do not know why- like, it is my destiny- to be the- chosen one.

7

Even though trespassing in the woods is illegal and I could be slaughtered and eat for it I do not care, and poaching carries the severest of consequences, more people would jeopardize it if they had weapons.

Nonetheless, most are not bold enough to venture out with just a homemade knife, I made mine for a food tray the tray they give you only once a day with roadkill on it. The water they give is the color of piss... some say they would eat their shit- I would not go that far, LIKEWISE, crazy will get to you.

My bow is an infrequency as I go under the wall, tagged along with a few other body parts- few others keep well hidden in the woods as I am the first to make the running leaps over all the traps and snags, carefully wrapped in waterproof covers. Only 10 of us girls made this run, there were so many that just stayed in the spacious room and playing with themselves- why? You are going to die anyway.

Why?

Why- not make this last run for food and sex and a way out of this all. If a boy can buy you out in a mirage. My father could have made good money selling us to a man or husband, yet it is common for us girls to be a tramp at our age if mommy and daddy have the bucks to do it. No gold band just someone that takes you for a possession... something to beat on and beat off on, they are playing thing... I feel.

On the other hand, if the troopers found out I was doing this like all these girls, like Alijah, Jania, Samee, Martah, Trace, and Majia- and so on... the other four I hardly know other- then seeing the nude in their bad and the shower rooms, or eating their rations next to me... I would have been publicly executed for rabbleroxing at this point I feel too; I am the girl her with gut or so the others say.

My sister is the shy one of us all not even gone through the woman change is not bleeding if you do not get that, I just started like a week ago- that would not even kill a cockroach to eat it, I had to do that for her too, yet she is young sweet and innocent.

Most of the armed forces ignore the few of us who are hunting to give to them or the whole group, for this is what they want, us to fight for it so they do not have to kill, so they can kill us for doing what they want.

Confusing? Nope- not to them... Because they are as hungry for fresh meat as anybody else is where what they want and what we want in not another human life to be killed yet they do. They are among our best trades- us- killing for the hell of it like a sick twisted sport- see the mass graves and the body braining like all the books. Then the idea that someone might be arming the ridge would never have been allowed.

All that was wisdom was dejected and seen as not to be useful in our lives, it has been a band. There are a lot of things that are forbidden to me, yet that does not stop me from doing it anyway- unlike my reluctant sister that fears everything and everybody.

8

In the fall, a few brave souls sneak into the woods to harvest apples, us girls climbing trees. Nevertheless- always in sight of the Grazing land with the eyes of at least one trooper looking up at the dress, you get what I am saying there never not there. Always close enough to run back to the safety of neighborhood 14 if distress arises.

‘Areas of fourteen.’ Where you can starve to death in safety,’ I mumble out yet I was the only one to hear or so I thought when the girl next to me was rolling her eyes. Then I glanced over my shoulder, and she was like up my LIKEWISE, even here, even in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone might overhear you, she said not wanting me to say a word.

The number on her jacket (G- S- 08976457544) was shining now in the spotlight of the guards' tower, we are going to get in trouble she said, as we were crawling to the boys' room. G for girl S for the star and the number ID.

Where are the star girls... that what they all call us here?

They all now were out I hear the click of the guns; it is just target practice for them just a hunt, they want us to do this!

9

When I was younger, I scared my mother to death that I would look out for my sister, the things I would blurt out about Area 14, about the people who rule our country, Paris was overrun and now there are 15 parts, from the remote city called the Capital up to us the little-unsolicited parts.

Eventually, I understood this would only lead us to more trouble, doing this so we went in and out fast with more than just a kiss- I had my I on Blazie, I was going to have this one thing- before I was axed off with my head. So-o I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts. On the other hand, unlike my sister, I do say way too much.

(Back)

Doing my work quietly in school was my life before this place and being ripped out of reality. I made only polite small talk in the public market that was my sister, not me. You can see us all there in this one-room schoolhouse. She is a good girl, not me-

I deliberate little more than trades in the hot plate at my desk, the bell rings out free to go to the market where I make most of my money giving up my food for the day.

Even at home there is nothing, I have on a long white T-shirt ripped up showing all my one side that was dads, that I wear as my dress, where I am less pleasant, I avoid discussing tricky topics. Like the reaping, or food shortages, or the war kill. Melisa might begin to repeat my words, she looks up to me for everything, where would she be without me behind her? They know this they all do...

I wear this all the time even in the rain, where you can see it all, yet no one care about, that when all they want to do is live on another day sex is not something we care about when kids are run around naked- like a tribe around a fire wild looking like revenues animals with a look in their eyes for the test of blood.

10

By the sight of him waiting there brings on a smile to my face until he is shot right in front of me and all of us girl run back to are badly scared, and in far that we were seen, some girl still doing their thing... they ask question seeming at white looks on our faces, one looked at me I said I never smile except in the when I see him know I will never- I was in love with that boy. It was not like I wanted to be held or anything LIKEWISE, she could attest to taking her hand off it to feel my pain.

No, her boy was in her hand only- that what I will have to do now- hers was killed off the night before. Killing is the sport they love, and I hate it!

My real name is Emalie, LIKEWISE, that not what I remember as just a number is all; I had barely whispered it and they say you are only allowed to give out your number to outsiders. So-o I thought what they going to kill me for this little thing I think not- so.

(Back)

Of on the hunt- 'Look what I shot, I said to my sister too young to have a gun-' she holds up a loaf of bread with the burl stuck in it, and I laugh hard. It is real bakery bread. How did she get that? Not the flat, dense loaves we make from our grain provisions.

She never said how she got it, yet I had my thought about it, as a boy gave it to her, which made it to her bedside... at home. I take it in my hands, and we share it, pull it to bits, and hold the wound in the crust to my nose, inhaling the fragrance that makes my mouth flood with drool. Fine bread like this is for special junctures. The boys have more for they are boys' worth something, unlike girls that have no value other than that of passing on this race they do not want.

'Mum, still warm,' I say. She must have been at the bakery at dawn with some runaway boy to trade for it, she gives him a kiss and a hug and her body she will it whatever she wants. For that is all girls are good for in these municipalities- 'What did it cost you?' I asked- Just kiss good night. I giggle think sure- I know- yet it was food, right?

‘Well, we all feel a little closer today, don’t we as we all look at the family for what may be the last time?’ I say fast, not even bothering to roll my eyes. ‘Melisa left us cheese on the traps saying this as a joke.’ I pulled it out. ‘We also shared a cuddly squirrel- I got the ass. Think the old man was feeling sentimental this morning,’ says that he would stay with us and not work for the day- there are just sealing shafts off- no money in that for them to take so why did it he felt.

‘Even wished me luck.’ I look at the blue star glowing etched into my skin on my arm. Like the Blue Bird nickels, that I will certainly not- interminably give up.

11

Her expression brightens at the treat as I hug her for what I thought the last time. ‘Thank you,’ I said to her for being in my life. We will have a real feast to more before we are either executed in a line or must fight for life as the chosen girls to keep our race going- they did as some not all.’

There we all are all ganged up in rows, like little toy soldiers we fall in these lines it was what was said for us to do in our thinking, as we all march into a Bureau agent our well or life, accent as she mimics

Effie Trinket, the maniacally upbeat woman who arrives once a year to read out the names at the jumping.

‘I almost disremembered! Blissful Starvation Stars!’ Her determination a few blueberries from the bushes around us.

‘Besides- May you’re yearning for the balances of life always be in your erranding.’ The confetti go off... as we await our fate, yet she the right bitch well live on for the rest of her days, yet we with the state may not... just for being not... what they want us to be... who are they? The backs were all murder in front of us, so we could see what was in this battle coming up. They are not good enough to scrub the fools, troopers say giggling amongst themselves. There well one is one black girl and one black boy fight in this upcoming event. They want less... us too...

The sweet from fingers going down my hand’s sourness detonates across my tongue.’ I no-win situation it in my mouth, as well as break the delicate skin with my teeth biting my nails. May you be yearning for the balance of life always be in your erranding!’

I arrived in my mind like us all that are made to think is what must be- with equal verve... we must put on it for the reason, that the unconventional is to be scared out of your intelligence. Also, the Bureau pronunciation is so la-di-da, anything sounds funny in it, and I look for her and see her knees are even knocking as she looks frightened. Like a lost little girl on her way to school in the dark mooring woods.

I watch as the woman we call Miss. Lorde Dio pulls names, with her hand.

Straight black hair, olive skin, gray eyes she is the head of the girls or so were tooled.

Likewise, we are not related any- of the star girls are the mix of them that is why we are being killed, burnt, and gassed, at least not closely. It was that moment of the

families never to be also once again, we are living in are yearning would change for their wants, for those that worked would go on without their kids, like my dad who works the mines resemble one another this way. Were one if not both of his offspring would die in this event.

That is why my mother and Melisa, with their light hair, braided and have bright haunting spooky-looking blue eyes, always look out of place in all the others, not something common. They are... amazing to me... My mother's parents were part of the small Kidd's class that outfits to troopers. X armed forces, and the occasional Ridge purchaser. They ran an apothecary shop in the nicer part of Area 14. Since almost no one can afford doctors or an RN, apothecaries are our healers or crunch heelers. My father got to know my mother, for they were in the same groupingshe was not all X you see, she was upper in her class for part 2.

She was banished from her mom and dad doing this and having kids not married. She is like one present to us- comparable to what is in his bloodline. She must have loved him to leave her home for the Ridge. Because on her hunts she would occasionally collect medicinal herbs, Melisa is good with her hands, even the boys say that when we were all together living free, to a point, and sell those to her shop to be brewed into medications.

All she ever wanted was a lover and she has even tool me what was in her romantic dreams, like walking through them, with her, their race. Loads of kissing, fleshly playing, and lusting! I never had anything like that... thus far I want to. I try to evoke that when all I can see is the lady who sat by, blank and out-of-the-way, while her

children turned to the skin, bones, and rot. I try to excuse her for my father's wishes. Nevertheless, to be truthful, I am not the merciful type, like my sister.

My sister's day in the days before this- bathing in a tub of warm water waits for me. and I scrub off her off all the dirt, water hard to find so I would have to be in there with her, and to get all the sweat from the woods of all with all the grim, and even wash my hair and her which only happens once a week. Let us put your hair up, too,' she says. I let her towel-dry it and braid it up around their head back into a ponytail. I can hardly recognize myself in the cracked mirror that leans against the wall. To my surprise, my mother has laid out one of her lovely sundresses for me and one for her with soft pink matching shoes- now there were days when we did not have anything on is feet.

Plus, that was the same day they kicked down the doors and said- we belong to them. You look beautiful, she was not a little girl with this look. And nothing like myself,' I say. I hugged her because I knew these next few hours would be terrible for her.

Her first reaping. She is about as safe as you can get since, she is only entered once. I would not let her take out any tesserae. Likewise, she is worried about me. That the unthinkable might happen. I protect Melisa in every way I can she knows that, LIKEWISE, then I am immobilized against the earning. The torment I always feel when she is in pain or fearful, she balls up lags to her chest, and threatens to register bad thoughts.

knocked like in the rocks up and over.

Starting this place, we are invisible LIKEWISE, have a clear view of the valley over to the tower, which was is teeming with summer life even if we were regulated, the girl in summer was socking sunlight dance in the streets with fire- Higdon's blasting water.

The day's war glorious before all hell was unleashed on my mind, with a blue sky like my sister's eyes and a soft breeze like her hair tickling my face. There had never been anything romantic between her and a boy until this last week, unlike me. And although he was only two years older, so I feel like it was harmless for what I would, and she would get out of it, he already looked like a man strong in all the places. It took a long time for us to even become friends, not for her she was swooning fast, to stop haggling over every trade and begin helping each other out.

When they produced a more efficient system that transported coal directly from the mines to the trains, we got on to go to this place up at the capital.

We are up to now- where it is- tonight. After the earning, where everyone is supposed to celebrate and love to hate and love to die with fate. As well as a lot of people do, out of relief that their children have been spared for another year. Likewise, at least two families will pull their shutters, lock their doors, and try to figure out how they will survive the painful weeks to come.

At six o'clock, we headed for the quadrangular. Presence is mandatory except you are on death's back door. This evening, officials will come around and check to see if this is the case. If not, you will be imprisoned. People fly in silently and sign in and go to their seats. The earnings are an awesome opportunity for the Bureau to track the population as well. Seven- through pre-teen year-olds are herded into roped areas marked off by age, the oldest in the back, the young ones, like Melisa, toward the front.

Dad and mothers- and teens or family members line up around the boundary where they have to say or be shot on the spot and some are and there are cheers, holding tightly to one another's hands.

Likewise, there are others, too, who have no one they love at stake, or who no longer care, who slip among the crowd, taking bets on the two kids whose names will be drawn. Balances are given on their ages we have too many we need to out the overloads, were tipping the scales- if you will, the movie plays out about the story of how this all came to be...

These same people tend to be informers, and who has not broken the commandment laws? I could be shot daily for hunting, LIKEWISE, the appetites of those in charge protect me. Not everyone can claim the same. Whether they are Ridge or merchant if they will break down and weep. Most refuse to deal with the racketeers, LIKEWISE, carefully, prudently. The pre-teen that is here is the one that has already done this and live to talk about it, yet that does not stop them from killing you if you fight them also.

The four commandments of stars pre-teens:

1. A star person may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm unless it is given the order.
2. A star person must obey orders given by human trooper's beings excluding orders that would conflict with the First Law.
3. A Star person must protect its existence if such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.
4. No sex of any nature or style identified in the populations with same sex without given rights to pass on your race.

Yet in this tournament, all laws are off!

That is what makes this so much fun- no- Miss Lorde Dio said, sipping on her mixed drink.

As we walked, I noticed Melisa's blouse had pulled out of her skirt in the back again and forced myself to stay calm. 'Tuck your tail in, little girl to you look cute and all grown up,' I say, smoothing the blouse back in place. I glance at the overall face in their whole school uniforms all unique to their parts in this parcel, yet the same with their LIKEWISE, tons on the one side how we all must be equal, still smoldering underneath his stony expression. Sitting next to each other at assemblies, partnering in sports activities.

We rarely chat, which suits- some just like us both simply fine to me if you are or not- you must give it to get it- no? The girl is calling out once she is in my year at school. Being the mayor's daughter of all things- no one is excluded if you have some star in you, you expect her to be a snob, LIKEWISE, she is all right. She just keeps to herself. Like me. Yet she may have the cone to get her replaced with someone like me.

Melisa, this calling of all nights- her drab school outfit has been replaced by an expensive white dress, where the girl all must strip in front of us boy's girls everyone sees this, seeing these girls all become what they are going to be when they change. Then her dark hair is done up with a pink ribbon by an older girl that has sieved the last war stars. Reaping clothes per- white show innocents- you have to tournament your colors and your place in this world. The boy forms the head down shaved... and made flawless... they say it the only time is a race would look worthy.

I read into my sister's thoughts- she was thinking about her boy- Does she mean it? I question- know they were hearing this too when a thought like this Permitted was not. Or is she messing with him, for love and lust? I am guessing the second. At the Bureau arena looking like the warrior playground in Roman times just art-deco- white glassy and modern, yet it is the 2040's.

His eyes land small on her I see the puppy love, circular pin at her before she took foot in her dress. Real silver LIKEWISE, tons and add-ons... Attractively crafted. 'What can you have other than your thoughts at this point when all you are in front of all of them, sure you are going to think? Five entries? The interplanetary gets tighter, more

enclosed as individuals reach. The square's quite large, LIKEWISE, not enough to hold Area 14th populace of about ten thousand.

Stragglers are directed to the adjacent streets, where they can watch the event on screen as it is televised live by the state. I was six when I was just twelve years old.'

Her face becomes closed off and is looked drop like her eyes in shame when she was not a woman there was nothing to take off- the people giggled saying she still a baby. The best thing is on her is she is picked- that she would die fast, boys put the money on her to not last, just like they did with me, and a girl named Illiah 'Good fortune, I hear from the girl next to me- she said my this be in your erranding's.' 'You, too,' I say, and the door closes and the light changes from intense when on our nude bodies change to now blue. Showing is the color of whom we are... and the color we are going to die for.

The rules of Starvation Stars are simple. In chastisement for the revolt, each of the 15 Boroughs must provide one girl and one boy, called LIKEWISE, to participate. The twenty-four try- LIKEWISE, will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last try LIKEWISE, standing wins.

14

The result was France, a shining Bureau ringed by thirteen Boroughs, which brought peace and prosperity to its citizens. Then came the dim days, the revolting of the neighborhoods in contradiction of the Bureau and their principal.

15 were defeated for this out of all of us, yet this a yearly thing the other is just knocked off my well of the powers at be, the thirteenth obliterated. The Treaty of Treason gave us the new laws to guarantee peace and, as our yearly reminder that the Dark Days must never be repeated, it gave us the Starvation Stars. I ask why not just kill us all and be done with it, they say what is the fun in that not seeing the pain and Starvation for life. Taking the kids from our Boroughs, forcing them to kill one another while having no say at all.

This is the Bureau's way of reminding us how we are at their sympathy and lack of it. How little unplanned we would stand of enduring another revolt. To make it embarrass- as well as torturous, the Bureau requires us to treat the Starvation Stars as entertainment, a sporting event pitting every Borough against the others. The last honored guy alive receives a life of ease back home, and their Borough will be showered with awards and the right to pass on his spermatozoa and pop as many kids as he wanted with whatever preteen girl he wanted, consisting of food. All year, the Bureau will show the winning Borough gifts of grain and oil and even delicacies like sugar while the rest of us battle starvation.

The mayor steps up to the platform and begins delivering... It is the same story every year. He tells of the history of us and is parts of France, the country that rose out of the ashes of and blood where every inch is covered. She lists the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the violating seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance lingered. 'Look how they take our children away and demean them like this naked, and afraid, they kill off babies like changing underwear, if

there are twins one is killed off, and sacrifice them and there is nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every one of you. Just as we did in Borough Thirteen.'

Then she reads the list of past Neighborhood 14 victors. In 200 years, we have had exactly three. Only one is still alive and he stands before us for two years back. A paunchy, young man -aged man, never a girl, that is the win for the girls this year to kick ass. A girl doing this, they say, is impossible. So...? What would you say as a girl? Are we that weak and worthless? The crowd responds with its token applause, LIKEWISE, he is confused and tries to give Effie Trinket a big hug, which she barely manages to fend off.

Them- whatsoever words they use, the real message is clear we want to see you fight till death for us to see if you want to live on and pass your blood down, yet you will have to lose some. 'Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there is nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every one of you. Just as we did in Neighborhood Thirteen.'

It is time for the drawing. Effie Trinket without the help of a hand- says as she always does, 'Females first!' and cross the goblet note with the girls' names. She goes on a bit about what an honor it is to be here, while all and sundry knows she is just aching to get bumped up to a better Borough where they have proper victors, not drunks who molest you in front of the entire nation. 'LIKEWISE, then again there are still thousands of slips in here we see the name binging up on the wraparound walls,' I wish I could whisper to her not to think- yet that not easy to do.

Through the crowd, I spot her looking back at me with a ghost of a smile. She reaches in, digs her hand deep into the note, and pulls out a slip of paper. The crowd draws in a collective breath and then you can hear a pin drop, and I am feeling nauseous and so desperately hoping that it is not me, that it is not me, that it is not me. As earnings go, this one at least has a slight entertainment factor. Likewise, suddenly I am thinking of her all the names 100 in that big glass droplet and how the balances are in your surroundings. Not compared to a lot of the boys.

And he is thinking the same thing about me because her face darkens, and she turns away. As it was already said-

15

Someone was gripping my arm, a boy from Sam, and I started to fall, and he caught me. Now I feel her berth in me like, like when I feel hard going down the steps trying to remember how to breathe, when I hit a window on wet concrete into and on a home and concerned back, unable to speak, totally stunned as the name bounces around the inside of my cranium.

And then I see her, the blood drained from her face, hands clenched in fists at her sides, walking with stiff, small steps up toward the stage, passing me, and I see the back of her blouse has become untucked and hangs out over her skirt. Somewhere far away, I can hear the crowd murmuring unhappily as they always do when a twelve-year-old gets chosen because no one thinks this is fair. It is this detail, the untucked blouse forming a ducktail, which brings me back to myself.

I screamed out Melisa was one slip of paper in thousands! There must have been some mistake here there must be. I wanted to replace her, yet I could not I would kill for doing that, that would have been rebelling and act that would see death to you for doing. I said in the same moments, know I should not- this cannot be happening... Her chances of being chosen so remote to all of us yet the love the underdog and the weak meek girl to do this, the taste of blood dripping down her vagina is what they want. And they are going to see that too, that I would not even bother to worry about her I know she going to pull through this not as innocent little girl LIKEWISE, come back as a crampon lady. She will be deflowered just trying to stay alive with all the boys that she needs to give her what she needs and that is food and warmth and housing with them. A girl is just not as strong as a boy that all say... Hadn't I done everything? On stage no- Melisa was singled out for her age, and virginity- STRIP! NAKED! OR DIE! We all gasped, yet some said it has happened before to country LIKEWISE, I see her pink and white kiddie undies moving to down she is reluctant, yet must do this... I nor she does not have to worry about a boy popping vagina open, a toper already it with his finger ripping fixed she cry and it bloods out saying we cannot have you be a little girl.

He licks the blood off his finger with his lips snickering, she will always be remembered for this... and I was the one to take her.

16

Anywhere far away would-be nice sing this all happening, I can hear the crowd murmuring building up into an oh, happily as they always do when a ten-year-old girl gets deflowered in front of a crowd, gets preferred because no one thinks this is

reasonable. As well as then I see her, the blood drained from her hands, face tightened in fists at her sides, walking with stiff, small steps up toward the stage, passing me, and I see the back of her blouse has become untucked and hangs out over her skirt yet again I did not say anything about it in my mind for her to hear.

‘Melisa!’ I do not need to shove through the crowd. The other kids make way proximately allowing me a straight path to the platform of the stage. I reach her just as she is about to mount the steps. With one sweep of my arm, I push her behind me.’
Melisa!’ The strangled cry comes out of her throat, and I saw that her muscles begin to move again as I was giving her the stench, yet I knew soon that would change with the shout me out and off for her mind and thoughts with a microchip in my arm the run to my mind using sound waves.

‘Lovely!’ says Effie Trinket. ‘LIKEWISE, then again, I have faith in there is a small matter of familiarizing the acquiring winner... There is some confusion on the stage, as all her mind chatting devices are ripped out of her body. The rule is that once a try LIKEWISE, the name has been pulled from the ball, another eligible boy if a boy’s name has been read, or girl if a girl’s name has been read, no one can move forward to take his or her place. In some Boroughs, I feel this would want not to be so, yet that life here- in which winning the reaping is such a great honor, people are eager to risk their lives, the volunteering is complicated. Nonetheless, in Borough 14, where the word byline is equal to the word corpse, volunteers are all LIKEWISE, extinct.

Melisa is earsplitting shrieking boisterously in front of me. She runs off the stage, naked as the day she was born as her dress slips as she trips some. Not caring about

anything other than me. She is wrapped in her skinny arms around me like a vice. 'No! No! You cannot go home with me; you must have a chance at winning- you could do this you know- I believe in you- remember that!'

I swallow this hard... 'Melisa, let go or they will... No-' I say harshly not wanting to be that way, because this is disconcerting me, and I do not want to cry. When they televise the replay of the evening tonight, every person will make note of my tears or, they marked as an easy target for the gun team. Acknowledging applause, I stand there unmoving while they take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. We do not condone it. All of this is wrong.

A weakling. I will give no one that satisfaction. 'Let go!' I can feel someone pulling her from my back. I turn and see Gale has lifted My sister off the ground and she is thrashing in his arms. 'Up you go, girl,' I say, I hear the voice fighting off the crying to keep stable, and then she is carried off toward the back was a door open without a sound. I steel myself and climb the steps down to the house with my mom's head in my chest panicking.

(Back)

Just like my father, Melisa, who no one can help loving. Was the one that I say living out her life as a helper of others, not killing them, that is why she was chosen for this?

Then to some degree, the unexpected happens. At least, I do not suppose it is because I do not think of area 14 as a place that cares about her. I have become someone

precious to her and that was looking out for her, yet I cannot ever do that, in my heart I knew she was a goner. Yet I would not let her feel that I have the options.

It is an old and rarely used gesture of our area, sporadically seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means goodbye to someone you love. Now I am truly in danger of crying, I know this... she is yet they what to see her fight to the death, for she was picked. Not allowed yet there giggling at her for this... I knew she would be strong- surprisingly strong for such a wreck. 'Look at her... Look at this one! They were saying she is just a baby! Easy meat!'

They bring them all back out after they all cool down... like an encore... All the names have been called out I could not even hear them like... it was not important.

All the boys and all the girls... they are all standing there all have their ways, and their personalities, yet none-stand out as much as she.

He cannot think of the word for a while- a man said- he releases me and starts for the front of the stage. He shouts, pointing directly into a camera. 'I like her!' His breath reeks of homemade whiskey, I have run for him, and it has been a long time since he was bathed. I know how to be a boot lager. Running at night only for it is illegal. Then he adds in the camera- 'Boldness I would bang her LIKEWISE!' he says triumphantly. 'More than you any other girls up there or in this assembly, therefore the picked here- she's pretty! - and that makes us want to fight for her battle.'

'Lots in her dreaminess... he was...' He is disgusting, LIKEWISE, I am grateful she was grossed out LIKEWISE, was think that was sweet even so... she too

nice... some said. They then did an up-close shot of her with her hands laced her eyes dropped chin tucked left, and wiggle- dancing with her arms V-ed inform of her hips to her shy ways. Camera gleefully trained and dropped to her eyes, and they got the upshot blue eyes glittering- lips wet to her peal face- cheeks shift pink, and she looked up with her eyes rolled to the top head down still.

She was biting her lip on the left side, looking like she was doing the pee-pee dance like is she looks downward it would all go away. I put my hands behind my back and stared into the distance, and made a hand sing, that only she would get so she would feel okay and safe. Eloy, the smallest of us all really- we asked where she came from, never growing in height since that age- she is 3 foot 8 inches- she is so small look five next to all these others that tower over her.

Even I tower over her at 5 feet.

17

Their numbers were clearer to me than their names...

All boys started with B- S- something...

All girls were G- S- something...

Long runs of numbers like a barcode...

Ezrah Everett- was the boy's name that was called out a boy that my sister played with for many years before this all happened, yet we are getting used to this, it is been going on now for ages, it is just now we have a new evil like a leader that wants

massacres... it is not just because fight and die that was the old ways, now it just pops anyone of she wishes just with a smile and bat of an eye- there died.

The boy Ezra- Oh, no she said- starting to think about him as a love interest- they read her thoughts I knew it I said, I think- this is sick- they want her to lose her boy crush or see what could be. Not him... she yelled- I have never spoken directly to this boy LIKEWISE, I feel close to him for how he looked and held her to him- in play or not there was a spark there. I watch him as he makes his way toward the stage. 6 feet five inches in height, solid build, coal-black hair that falls in waves over his almost hitting the back of his neck all combed back not too long yet not short. Big brown eyes that change gold in the sunlight.

There were no odds here in the name draw- it was the thought of these kids- and what they did not want to see happen. Their worst nightmare- would be-and then they do it to be prominent. Kill your crush for example and if you do not someone is going to. That the sport here- killing what you love. The shock of the moment is registering on his face was seeing her having the same look of heart hitting the floor and back up, you can see his struggle to remain emotionless with her loss in hope feeling as he had, LIKEWISE, his brown eyes show the terror like I have seen so often in prey on the hunt for deer and others large or small tournament.

He is now a large tournament- a moving target- fun someone in the group does not just pop him off now- oh they cannot we all lost our gun to the government- Melisa got hers back just for this event only. All the troopers in blood red, black, and gray

uniforms- they use our shit to kill us with- nice right- helpless are we. Yet that was the overturn that took place.

Here are her uniform blue and white... that has chevrons on the front also there is her logo- and nameplate, and it shines in the light- with are cobalt color that fades into navy blues. They have already made up... each uniform shows their colors, from their parts- unique to their towns. With a symbol that is all, there is too. Melisa is the Blue Bird, with guns crisscrossed in the back. So-o they knew there was no randomness here or so they want us to think- I am not that dumb- some are though.

A uniform with nothing underneath where if she takes the top off, she is topless, no bras for to be far she does not need one- they find this funny too, for these things wool, and you cannot sleep in that way, so the girl must run around in the nude, fun. It is all part of their sick tournament. Her hair will cover some yet not all over her chest... it all that they want to see. I am sure we will see it all before the stars are over. And say if a boy can do this a girl can- fairness they call it was all the same... also, there was her stuff need- like them all-a medieval archery bow- in pink with pink aero- feathers which she made and sets her apart from the others...

A Winchester gun is also pink, with a white barrel and long sharp bayonets. All the old technology they said adds to guessing or waiting for what was next when you are loading and someone is running upon you, yet she is the fastest girl I have ever seen to load a shot. She has a Gut hook hunting knife, to cut necks with our hands and more.

A civil war sword, with a handguard that's a plus on her end, she says one boy cut his hand off. I know not to shoot until I can see smell their breath on my face, and not to fire until I see the color in their eye's balls. I am going to put this up to a heart and pull the trigger, I do not want too LIKEWISE, I have too.

Her dad's gun passed down those fits in a holster on her belt. Single barrel pinfire pistol AKA thumb gun. Brass Knuckles if needed, and she will need them, a lot of this is a hand and kicking bloodbath. 100 areas and a purse with all the girl things she needs- like pads that all she wanted to be what they say is far to the other girls they made sure they all had the same, for others are crapping and she well to it is all part of the tournament for the girls on the fight- the time is in control of this too in her mind, and ammunition.

In this tournament, you can see a girl do it all- like we see everything about her life when she comes in OHs in the night before sleeping or in the marring- shits and pisses too. It is what makes it entertaining, they say. I no Melisa- she sprays out six times, for bath time. So, I wonder if she will, being shy? You are going to die anyway so why not... have some good feelings coming out of you... and so what- yet that is me not her... I am glued to the wall screens in my small one-room homespun that gave to us. It is smaller than a teardrop taller, yet they say this is better all our old homes were bulldozed over with all our crap inside, yet we have a screen that links to the troops.

They do not have cameras in our bathrooms or bedrooms for this fact, yet I wonder this too- for they know how sexual Melisa is with her own body, not public chat that she where kiddie undies, that she is pre-pubescent, that she does not have a bar yet.

That she loves horses, and dolls, and matching thin strap- colorful sundress, with her shoes, and fingernails. She is doing her hair with soft waves and long breads, and playing outside, picking flowers in spring.

What would you do if someone were seeing you do all this, I mean you must do this right? I wonder if she will- get with him... before death?

The boy thinks about him- I know, I have seen them in the bakery, school and at my home, LIKEWISE, one is too old now to volunteer he is older for her like a teenager. This is standard, the Family devotion only goes so far for most people on earning diurnal.

(Back)

Melisa- I was scared... 'I suppose now that my mother was locked in some mysterious world of sadness lost in here crazies'.' There was no choice, LIKEWISE, for me to understand... At so young- LIKEWISE, at the time, all I knew was that I had lost not only a father, LIKEWISE, a mother as well.

Zoie- AKA the girl talking to you- hi! It has become known that my mother is crazy now lost in this madness... of being with my dad in her mind... that everyone looks down on us even more, and what they are- shit on a boot next to a doorstep. They longer care for us, being a money pit on society. I grew up seeing those home kids at school, seeing them go up fast made of ply.

All white, in and out. No colors... not a worm at all so cold. A sweet, tiny girl who cried when I cried before she even knew the reason, who brushed at the sight of a

boy, looking at her walking to school, who still wet the bed some nights, because for seeing my dad beating on my mom for hitting it before the time was done or spending money.

He had hated her she loved him- yet he was good to us- the money goes to the kids not you for dumb shit- coal dust I tack in is not for you to blow- on dresses I need food- and the kids are starving- why. Let us just say the happy sexy time is all that keep them

cheerful to us even. Not a good matchup yet he wanted her when she was younger.

The sadness, the marks of angry hands on their faces, the hopelessness that curled their shoulders forward. I could never let that happen to Melisa. The community home would crush her like a bug. So- I kept our predicament a secret.

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However, the money ran out and we were slowly starving to death. There is no other way to put it other then, I kept telling myself if I could only hold out, Melisa turns ten on the 14th and be able to sign up for the high leaves class at school, and a working job with younger kids in the birthing rooms, that money went to me- I held it for her... I become a mom, I have the hunter's job... getting food and seeing that she has what she needs. I see that she is bathed, brushed her hair, and teeth, things like that. I clean her dress up and hang the line.

For three days, we had had nothing, LIKEWISE, boiled water with some old, dried mint leaves I had found in the back of a cupboard. Melisa- I remember the rain showers had waterlogged through my sister's lager coat, leaving me chilled to the bone. By the time the market closed, I was there seeing if I could beg for money and food also playing the guitar, all blue fades into white, worn with gray shown some on the back and neck, it has a defeat tall paces, something I do not get... yet it a Gibson, it looks crappy yet sounds okay to me and most worm when the days are so cold and you must be by a barn burl to stay warm, I get an amp out of a dumpster by my home where this Gibson was too. Blue binding, I have my logo on the back with my number- my name, and my life story on it.

And that is the saying-

Love is foolish with the one you want to be what to not be- to some like me I must see, the tournament of warfare not far too careful, they see me fight, in their sight, day and night, is this right? The height of love is the death at the end that is lasting. I will be remembered like the bluebird in flight- see my tears as they dry- going high- either way like a rattle that does not matter: 'Besides- my yearning for the balances of life always be in your erranding. Nothing more nothing less.'

I was shaking so hard I dropped clothes in a mud puddle when I saw the firing line 100 man and 80 girl is all blast all at once babies too and little kids, they ran the was shot in the handgun above the nose, for not giving in... they form part 15 no longer a town at all. I did not pick it up for fear I would keel over and be unable to regain my feet. Besides, no one wanted those clothes. And then they would stop to reload their colts, and

fire them empty one girl was naked, no more than three, and I saw her run and fall to a trooper.

I named her Laina. She had no name, just a number, I do not know what it was about her- LIKEWISE, I had to see she was remembered, yet like all the others she either went to the mass graves. Where I saw them just tossed her in like trash with all the other nude bodies young and old alike. I would most like to be eaten by something wild in the woods when this all goes down... I do not see why it any different than this- may be better. I wonder if I should just take the gun now and end it before it starts- only one thing stops me... and that is the faith of young adoration. OR I WOULD...! I have it here

at my temple- why not right? I try yet I cannot do this...

I cannot...

I cannot...

I cannot...

I squeeze my eyes thigh... I cannot... they taunt me too... in my mind look in my penitentiary sterol- like room awaiting my task the next day where I will have it all or so they say- I ask why to bother. They are cute about it to giving us things to end it before it- starts... to see if they can crack you. It is my last big meal- might as well rub it in- fun- they know we are not going to eat- that we cannot hold it- yet we starved up to this point- yet that the point to play with us to Freak- with us. Thinking about the hell week to come- therefore...?

Melisa- I remember crawling into bed, and falling into a dreamless sleep, yet fearful all feeling like I was gunned down or chased by someone. It did not occur to me until the next morning that the boy might have burned the bread on purpose. Might have released the loaves into the flames, knowing it meant being punished, and then delivered them to me. The boy would glance my way all the time, LIKEWISE, I was watching him not letting him see that I was. Because of the bread, because of the red weal that stood out on his cheekbone. What had she hit him with? My dad never hit us, yet mom was the bitch. I could not even imagine if- she was that in more than one way. You get that...?

The boy took one look back to the bakery as if checking that the coast was clear, then, his attention went back to bread in my direction. The second quickly followed, he was in the room over the way they made sure we could see one another yet not be with each other beforehand- just part of the tournament they played, closing the kitchen door tightly behind him.

Zoie- I remember- I reached out to Melisa and she climbed on my lap when she was seven, her arms around my neck, and head on my shoulder. Like- she did when she was a toddler; like she did the night before.

I remember- my mother sits beside me and never hugs her arms around us. For a few minutes, we said nothing. Then I start telling them all the things they must reminisce about doing now that I will not be there to do them for them. Yet for her news, she never really was... just so you know mom!

The take outs- when I am done with teachings about energy, and staying in school homework, and stop turning in to my mother. I calmed down for the night after seeing her off-

Thinking about the times- I would do not bother suggesting Melisa learn to hunt for I had never thought she would be the one. She has no background in the killing, only seeing- I tried to teach her a couple of times and it was catastrophic- she feels on her LIKEWISE and got hurt- I said- no more. The sticks horrified her, and whenever I shot something, she would get teary, and talk about how cute it was not to do that- we must live I said. We might be able to heal it if we got it home soon enough- not understand it was not moving anymore- so I distillate on that too- like what is she going to do here? Lay- there and die...?

I must be a babysitter- I cannot cock out on the flames and leave Melisa on her own to run free- I knew she would get lost like a puppy. There is no me now to keep you both alive if I do not do this and I am the only girl here too. It does not matter what happens- to her I would never forgive myself- whatever you see...

Parting words- You must assure me you will battle!' My voice a whisper not to draw attention- that she may not be the best one in the call outs. The fear I abandoned- felt was solid and vice versa. I pulled her arm from my grasp and moved out of the holding room. 'I was sick feeling; I could have treated myself if I'd had the medicine- yet I can buy that stuff- you deal with it.' That is life- 'OH- JUST DEAL WITH IT!'

Clasping my hands to her face... holding in like- so tiny 'You must take the fight and do- all that I do for you on your own you think you can do that- umm- hum- she whispered softly and thoughtfully- looking up at me towering over her, too. You are so fast and brave. You can win- you could you know- you could get this- do it for me. 'I have seen her carried off by them- the troopers- kicking and screaming like a newborn. Suffering from immobilizing sadness since- I see her on the screens we all do like an animal- locked in the pound. It is a sickness of the kiss of death- the last kiss- to be given by me to her, LIKEWISE, it is one we cannot afford. Her- she was my world- my... everything- I cannot win said- Melisa- you must know that in her heart. The competition will be far beyond my abilities. Kids from wealthier Boroughs, where winning is a huge honor, who have not been trained for... Your whole life I never did this for you- and now I must kick myself for not- you understand this...?

Boys- do not trust them all- go with your gut and in here she points- to her head and heart. Those all see them they, not your friends do not let them be- they are two to three times your size, do not be intimidated- you know that word right- um-hum she said. This one girl, girls over her looks of to- show with her eyes- not to scare you- she who knows 50, unlike ways to kill you with a blade. Oh, there will be people like me, too.

People to weed out before the real fun begins. She threw a knife into a five-year-old- a dead girl walking- it hit her in the left eye- at trials killing her- they use real kids here at this, so you are going to have to not care about seeing a life end. Were all a waste of a bloodline why not they said this year why not... have real targets- young

helpless- kids. It is a sick youngling to see them lose a life- they say wishing from the screens- like dogs forming at a moth in heat.

Her last words- 'I will not... I cannot! You know I will not! Zoie, it repeats over and over in my brain- 'he says, and they yank us apart and slam the door, and I will never know what it was he desired me to evoke. It is a little ride from the Evenhandedness- Building to the 1920's train station. I have never been in a car before, a mostly would- and black truck- that looks like it out of the 1921 mostly world cars are outdated now- yet I get to have this- must if all ride rails.

Melisa- cars- Seldom even ridden in motor carriages. In the ridge, we travel on foot- or rail- most do not have the money to have wonderful things, and if they did, they were overturned. I have seen a few puttering around yet never in one... they bring in the food for the rich and the rich are the one that has the most- buying the troopers off. I see the same year of a truck going down the brick, fire-engine color red, running after the blazes dinging a bell. I have been right not to cry about all this- yet I could not hold it in. The station is swarming, now- I knew really- with reporters are in my face I shy away- I do not want the spotlight with their insect-like cameras trained stanchly on my face as I make my way over the height bridge in the world.

Nevertheless, I have had a lot of exercise at wiping my face clean of emotions with all the death I have seen. I catch a hint of myself on the television screen over the way the giggle at that- look I made- on the wall that is an expression my influx lives and feel content that I seem almost fearful. If I am going to cry, now is the time to do it. By morning, I will be able to wash the damage done by the tears on my face. Nonetheless,

there were lots of tears to come. I am too tired yet not too numb to cry. The only thing I feel is a desire to be somewhere else.

So, I let the train rock me into oblivion. I put the see-through lacy outfit back on that they give us to sleep in, just slightly crumpled from spending the night on the floor rocking.

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Time to move the said- there- and passed- on and off- the train finally begins to slow, and suddenly bright light floods the compartment. I ran to the window to see what we have only seen on television, the Bureau, the ruling city. The cameras have not lied about their splendor. If anything, they have not captured the magnificence of the glistening buildings in white and gray and cobalt glass hues that tower into the air. The people begin to point at us eagerly as they are recognizing an honor girl train rolling into the city.

I step away from the window, sickened by their excitement, knowing they cannot wait to watch us die. I see the boy I like over in his car- he holds his ground not being all into me- yet I could tell he was, waving and smiling at the gazing crowd. He only stops when the train pulls into the station, blocking us from their view I blow him a kiss- no one saw...

Yesterday I wanted to say my final goodbyes to my one girlfriend Samee and family. Nevertheless, that is a dark and creaky thing that moves like a snail and smells of sour milk. The walls of this elevator are made of crystal so that you can watch the

individuals on the ground floor shrink to ants as you shoot up into the air. I look over the city is just what you would think it looks like- all big and glassy. Say hello to your new home for a week- The Training Center has a tower designed exclusively for the honors girls. This will be our home until the definite Stars begin. Each Borough has an entire floor. You simply step onto a silo and press the number of your Borough.

Bed- I kick off my shoes and climb undertaking it all off that how I sleep, or I can I have to do this- I play with the hood and fall fast asleep- it is a girl thing- the covers over me I see nothing LIKEWISE, that boy in my tight eyes. The shivering has not stopped. The girl does not even remember me. Nonetheless, I know she does. Do not forget the face of the person who was your last hope. I pull the covers up over my head as if this will protect me from the redheaded girl who cannot speak. Likewise, I can feel her eyes staring at me, piercing through walls, doors, and bedding. I wonder if she will enjoy watching me- over there- like she would be killing her or the other way around- we share this room now.

2 girls in a small room. They want to see if we are going to kill before the time! Then I am overwhelmed in light-yellow foam that I must scrape off with a heavy bristled brush. Oh, well. At least my blood is flowing. Slowly, I drag myself out of bed and into the shower. I arbitrarily punch LIKEWISE, tons on the control board, and end up hopping from foot to foot as alternating jets of icy cold and steaming hot water assault me. I put my hair down in the two braids down my front side. This is the first time since the morning of reaping that I resemble myself. No fancy hair and no fancy clothes yet mostly lacy to see if you have

cuts or packing hidden stuff, no flaming capes. Just me. Looking like I could be headed for the woods. It calms me.

I am nervous about the training. There will be a week of this the first days in which all the star girls practice together with the targets of killing life.

On the last evening, we will each get a chance to achieve in isolated before the star makers. The thought of meeting the other star's uncompromising makes me nauseous. I turn the roll I have just taken from the basket over and over in my hands, LIKEWISE, then my Starvation is gone only the Starvation of blood to kills is all I need now. Not- Not- Not ME! It is them making ME!

The chatting- I try to focus on the talk, which has twisted to our interview clothes, I do okay they say I need to talk more they say- yet she is cute. We all shower together with us girls. I do not like this. I am shy, and they look at me like meat. And what to play with me- U- No! When I open my door, the redheaded girl is collecting my United and boots from where I left them on the floor before my shower. I want to say sorry for getting her in trouble earlier when I tripped on her hair walking in it is that long.

The face of the redheaded girl intertwines with gory images from earlier Famine Tournaments, with my mother withdrawn and unreachable, with My sister emaciated and terrified. I bolted up screaming for my father to run as mine exploded into a million deadly bits of light.

Dawn is breaking through the windows I see it all there are no covers on the big windows, yet everyone saw me do everything on-screen even shower and what I did

in bed there are even cams in my fingers and under the sheets how I do not know-
LIKEWISE, I know they are- there to see me do that too.

Eat- I had set out to tell her I was sorry about dinner. Nonetheless, I remember I am not supposed to speak to her unless I am giving her an order. She avoids my eyes as we make our way to the table, give a small nod, and eat. My slumbers are filled with disturbing dreams of depth, wetness, and death.

The Bureau has misty, haunted air. My headaches and I must have bitten into the side of my cheek at night. My tongue probes the ragged flesh and I taste blood.

The boy I like- like- I exchanged a look with him. 'I don't have any secret about having the tingles down there for him, I want to lock lips at some point I have to before the end.' The end of what is that? Really what is that all about?' I have eaten enough of your squirrels, yet I do not know how to kill one- how can I kill a child?'

I never thought about him eating the squirrels I shot. Somehow, I for one continuously see in your mind's eye- himself being there I remember her saying. Not out of greed- he was there for you to remember. On the other hand, then again because town families usually eat expensively

LIKEWISE, her meat. Beef and chicken and horse. I recall this... 'There's always hand-to-hand combat.

All you need is to produce a knife, and you will at least stand a chance. If I get jumped, I am dead!' I can hear my voice rising in anger. I do not like to kill I remember saying... cut to now- 'You will not- mind- if it is to live! You will be living up in some

tree-eating raw squirrels and picking off individuals with arrows. You know what my Zoie said to me when she came to say goodbye as if to cheer me up, she says neighborhood 14 will finally have a winner. Then I comprehended, she did not mean me, she meant you!’ said- the boy.

The boy- she is a dismissal, I know- it... my hope to look out for her- until the time comes, I can no longer.

Melisa- I know he is not lying about that- I heard in his thoughts before all of this. He has physical power that is strong and perfect tilts his eyes ever so right and his six-pack chest at me in the light- the advantage with the girls- would I be that girl- to see the eyes shine for me- as I look at these white teeth- ever so right.

Training Center- Throw a spear- a woman said- that was teaching at the nine-year-old girl’s head and kill her- kill her- if you do not you go down in your points. Spend the time trying to learn something you do not know, I remember her saying to me- going back- Weights try do not overdo and hurt your body, do not reveal how much you can lift in front of the other stars.

They do not need to see that you are meeker than they, you are going to train group that is not far- it kills, or they kill you without blinking- and lick you up and down to spit on it, rubbing it all in you. The plan’s the same for both of you. If you are smart, you will get this I cannot say- just think hart Melisa and go with your intentions- wink.

Zoie- Learn to tie a decent knot and so on, you and your gun and to pack ammo- I do not even care about the bow much to show- that if you run out of other things

you only have five aero's anyways, that are tipped in bad stuff- do not tuck the tip- K.
Um-hum- I say childishly. Save showing knife for there going at that point- what you are best at until your private sessions. Are we good?'

I nod- Zoie this was the day before the callouts. Do not fire the small one unless it is deep in their left boob, and squeeze hard, it will take about a day for them to die slowly- yet they back off. Do not ever panic- or you will die- do not sweat in the cold your you will die- also.

Now night- I bit my lip and stalk back to my room, making sure he- the boy that I like- like- can hear the door slam yet he sees all of me with the screen in his room and the double-sided firebox. I sat on the bed, undressing, hating him over they are doing things I do not understand, hating myself hard saying my name- to mention that I was feeling the same. Is it- love...?

Is this love- I see and now feel...?

As his thought was turned on to me in my mind and his by them. In my bed him have this with me- and does he- it was a lovemaking moment of heightened lust. The people went nuts for us- feeling this moment, of zenith.

Pretending to be friends, the next day I hear giggles from the other girls!
Talking about each other's strengths is a bond, insisting the other take credit for their abilities. Because, in fact, at some point, we are going to have to knock it off and accept we are bitter adversaries. Stupid instruction that we stick together in training like his hand on me at night. It is the fault I was ripped on his too, I was doing it right never did that

one, yet I saw it through his eyes- and mine in his- with switched like bodies at the end feeling, and seeing within and out, for telling him he did not have to coach us disjointedly.

Nevertheless, that did not mean I wanted to do everything with him today so they could see the crematory- of a puppy- the love they call it. He was all into me, not letting his hand off me and not stopping them from his hands, feeling me up down the uniform. Yah

I had a hand full of LIKEWISE, - so did he- cute right!

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I hear his voice in my head- saying cute things. She has no idea- over there that this is what she was thinking about. Although along with what she needed to know. I made sure she knew what not to hear- and see- in training... for she is the girl, I picked to work with as a team. The effect she can have on him is a lot some say he not thinking clearly to learn to fight- that he will pass fast- daydreaming of her- ha, that is what they think he said- in his thoughts. Visibly they meant to degrade me and him. -Right? Likewise, a tiny part of my phenomena is praised. That meant I was interesting- in some way.

It is ten p.m. I clean my teeth and smooth back my hair again. Anger temporarily blocked out my nervousness about meeting the other teams, LIKEWISE, now I can feel my anxiety rising once more. I catch myself biting my nails.

Late-night- It is weird how much he has noticed me from inside and out. Like with kindness, he is paid to my hunting- over the years- um like was not enough. Besides deceptively, I have not been as oblivious to him as I imagined, moreover. I have kept track of all of this in my beep mind they said.

Blood spatter- off with youngling's heads- let the bodies hit the floor- let the young bodies hit the floor! DEATH! I look around at the Career girls who are showing off, obviously trying to intimidate the field. Then at the others, the malnourished, the incompetent, shakily having their first education with a knife or an axe. They walk up and we show off with them having to in programmed in their mind to die- they even so sick to ask for it. 100 girls under 10 knocked-off in less than 30 minutes... Only five low-class boys hurt not all killed.

The doors open into an enormous gymnasium filled with various weapons to practice with- you in the fight we only have what we had at our homes- so if you have an Ak-47 good for you- I do not- far no- yet that is not what this is about- it is about blood falling to the floor!

I move on to the obstacle courses. The actual training rooms are below the ground level of our building- and in the night lit fields. With these elevators going in and out with them in control- yet again, the ride is less than a few a moment.' Although it is not yet nine in the morning, we are here all day today, we are the last ones to arrive.

The other stars are met in a tense circle like a dojo- it is about respect for the past- twisted in their tournament.

My man and I are the only two dressed alike. As soon as we join the circle, the head trainer, a tall, Experts in each skill will remain at their positions, a sporty female named steps up and begins to explain the training agenda she towers over me not him though. Some of the stations teach survival skills, other fighting techniques. We are forbidden to engage in any combative exercise with another try LIKEWISE. There are assistants on hand if we want to practice with a partner. We will be free to travel from area to area as we choose, according to our mentor's instructions. 'Suppose we tie some knots,' I say, they all giggle- like I am retarded! He said it was cute...! Is that all that matters?

We pass an unfilled post where the trainer seems satisfied to have schoolchildren. You get the feeling that the knot-tying class is not the Starvation stars burning spot. When he apprehends, I know something about snares, he shows us a simple, excellent trap that will leave a human competitor dangling by a leg from a tree- now outside in the fields barricaded in with high walls- all white.

And bright lights... We concentrate on this one skill for an hour until both of us have mastered all that is needed. Then we move on to concealment. He genuinely enjoys this station, twirling a combination of mud and clay and berry juices around his pale skin, weaving disguises from vines and leaves.

The instructor who runs the concealment position is full of passion for his work- yes some are just A-holes.

(Back)

The crescent moon roll dotted with seeds from Borough 13. Somehow, although it is made from the same gear as I walk to 14, it looks a lot more mouthwatering than the horrible drop biscuits that are the standard fare at home. I had to get something, didn't I?

Playing with him- We both give a convincing laugh and ignore the stares from around the room. I tried breathing- my face lost- as I recall the event, a Permitted story, in which I had stupidly defied a black bear over the rights to a skep. My boy is laughing and asks questions right on cue. He is much better at this than I am at that too- so cute, right? On the second day, while we are taking a shot at spear throwing, he whispers to me all sweet things and nothing. 'We have a shadow of me now.'

I throw my spear, which I am not too bad at if I do not have to throw too far and see the little girl from Borough 1 standing back a bit, watching us. She is ten-year-old, the other one that is small yet not as petite as me in stature. Up close she looks like a lost schoolgirl- walking in a playground. She has optimistic, dark eyes and lustrous skin and stands tilted up on her toes with her arms slightly extended to her sides, as if ready to take wing at the smallest amount of sound. It is impossible not to think of a bluebird.

I bit my lip. Permitted is a small yellow flower that grows in the Field. Leah. My sister Rose. Neither of them could tip the scale at seventy pounds soaking wet. (Thinking back, I was...)

Cut ripped out into reality- I pick up another spear while my boy throws one that I gave him. 'Her name is Leah,' I say softly. I remember her some...

My heart sinks... All the boys and at least half of the girls are bigger than I am, even though many of the tries LIKEWISE, have never been fed properly. Kids- You can see it in their bones, their skin, and the hollow look in their eyes.

Now that I know she is there, it is hard to ignore that I am the youngest child in the room. She slips up and joins us at different stations. Like me, she is clever with plants, climbs swiftly, and has a good aim. She can hit the target every time with a slingshot. What is a slingshot against a 225-pound male with a sword that going to get her...? Oh, yes this is all she must fight with- far-right? NO!

I read down the list of the skills from stations. I was part of my eyes cannot help flitting around to the others. It is the first time we have been collected, on level ground, in simple clothes. The exceptions are the kids from the wealthier Boroughs, the volunteers, the ones who have been fed and trained throughout their lives for this moment. I may be smaller naturally, LIKEWISE, overall, my family's ingenuity has given me an edge in that area.

The slight benefit I gained coming into the Training Center, my fiery entrance last night, seems to disappear in the attendance of my opposition. The others were jealous of us- I knew- he knew, LIKEWISE, not because we were astounding since our graphic designer and a team like the makeup guys were. That is what we to look at that part and all.

About- It is technically against the rules to train try LIKEWISE before they reach the Bureau LIKEWISE, it happens every year. The meat and plants from the woods combined with the exertion it took to get them have given me a healthier body than most of those I see around me.

Now I see nothing LIKEWISE, contempt in the glances of the Career trying LIKEWISE. Each must have fifty to a hundred pounds on me.

In area 14, we call them occupation acknowledgments or just careers. Besides, like as not, the champion will be one of them. They project arrogance and prominently. I stand straight up, and while I am thin, I am strong. The tri LIKEWISE, from 1, 2, and 7 conventionally have this look about them.

When Alla releases us, they head straight for the lethal tall stick- with a gold spoon up to her LIKEWISE, is looking over all the weapons in the gym and handle them with ease.

I am thinking that it is lucky I am a fast runner when he nudges my arm and I jump yet in an effective way. He is still beside me- his expression is sober- yet loving to me only.

Moving on- ‘where would you like to begin?’ When we finally escape to bed on the second night with me, he mumbles that were not getting any sleep, I make a sound that is somewhere between a snort and a laugh, saying okay- I want what I want- so let give them a late-night show to see- Then catch myself doing more than ever with him. It

is messing with my mind too much, trying to keep straight when we are friends, not full-on lovers at this age- yet age is nothing to them or us at this point- we have sex all night!

Then when we are not ready for all this we no- yet we got it all down and in and out, to say the least. Bang! Bang- bang- bang- bang! You know exactly with happen by that! Done! Aww- okay put it back in- We even broke the bed! I will know where we stand with the folks seeing this- we have fans big time.

‘Let us pretend there’s no one around- and keep on keeping on with this.’ ‘God not so fast and hard’- I no- take it- I said riding even hard for that to go- you have too- ‘well- uh’ he said- you are good I say. Umm, we said together, and I got the O!

Next to seeing all the wannabes! Seeing all the ass with cams! - I am sick of this- I did not sleep last night- crank yes, after that, we only talk in front of people- about how I got plowed- and then frogged him after- and went for the good night kiss too- and my love life at nine years old. Crap- They start to call our numbers out of lunch, for our cloistered sessions with the Tournament Producers. The area by region, first the girl, then the boy.

As usual, Borough 14 is slated to go first- for I am the youngster here they call me. We linger in the dining room, unsure where else to go. No one comes back once they have left. As the room empties, the pressure to appear friendly lightens. By the time they call Leah, we are left alone. We sat quietly until they summoned my lover to come. He rises- with my hand in hand.

‘Thanks. I will,’ he says. ‘You- Shoot straight.’

I nod- I do not know why I said anything at all. Although if I am going to lose, I would rather win with him than the others.

Better for our Borough, for my mother and my sister.

After about fifteen minutes, they called my name. I smooth my hair, set my shoulders back, and walk into the gymnasium. Instantly, I knew I was in trouble. They have been here too long, the Tournament Producers. Sat through twenty-three other demonstrations. I had too much wine, most of them. I want more than anything to go home.

There is nothing I can do LIKEWISE, continue with the plan. I walk to the archery station. Oh, the weapons!

I have been itching to get my hands on them for days! Bows are made of wood, plastic, metal, and materials I cannot even name. Arrows with feathers cut in flawless uniform lines. I choose a bow, string it, and sling the matching quiver of arrows over my shoulder.

There is a shooting range, LIKEWISE, it is much too limited. Standard bull's-eyes and human silhouettes. I walk to the center of the gymnasium and pick my first target. The dummy was used for knife practice. Even as I pull back on the bow, I know something is wrong. The string's tighter than the one I use at home. The arrow's more rigid. I miss the dummy by a couple of inches and lose what little attention I had been commanding. For a moment, I was humiliated, then I headed back to the bullseye. I shoot repeatedly until I get the feel of these new weapons.

Back in the center of the gymnasium, I take my initial position and skewer the dummy right through the heart. Then I sever the rope that holds the sandbag for boxing, and the bag splits open as it slams to the ground. Without pausing, I shoulder to roll forward, come upon one knee, and send an arrow into one of the hanging lights high above the gymnasium floor. A shower of sparks bursts from the fixture.

It is an excellent shooting. I turn to Tournament Producers. A few are nodding approval, LIKEWISE, most of them are fixated on a roast pig that has just arrived at their banquet table.

Suddenly, I am furious that with my life on the line, they do not even have the decency to pay attention to me. That I am being upstaged by a dead pig. My heart starts to pound, I can feel my face burning. Without thinking, I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Tournament maker's table. I hear shouts of alarm as people stumble back. The arrow skewers the apple in the pig's mouth and pins it to the wall behind it. Everyone stares at me in disbelief.

'Thank you for your consideration,' I say. Then I give a slight bow and walk straight toward the exit without being dismissed.

As I stride toward the elevator, I fling my bow to one side and my quiver to the other. I brush past the gaping Avoxes who guard the elevators and hit the number twelve landed on with my fist. The doors slide together, and I zip upward. I make it back to my floor before the tears start running down my cheeks. I can hear the others calling me from

the sitting room, LIKEWISE, I fly down the hall into my room, bolt the door, and fling myself onto my bed.

Then I begin to sob.

Now- I have done it! Now I have ruined everything! If I had stood even a ghost of a chance, it vanished when I sent that arrow flying at the Tournament Producers. What will they do to me now? Arrest me? Execute me? Cut my tongue and turn me into an Avex so I can wait on the future stars of Panel?

What was I thinking, shooting at the Tournament Producers? Unquestionably, I am situated, I was shooting at that apple, because I was so angry at being overlooked. I was not trying to kill one of them, yet I want so- to do that. If I would have, I would be dead fast!

Oh, what does it matter? It is not like I was going to win the Tournament anyway. Who cares what they do to me? What scares me is what they might do to Zoie and me, how my family might suffer now because of my impulsiveness. Will, they take their few belongings, or send my mother to prison and me to the community home, or kill them? They would not kill them, would they?

Why not? What do they care about? I should have hung around and asked for forgiveness. Otherwise, I chuckled, like it was a big pun. Then maybe I would have found some compassion. Likewise, then again instead, I followed out of the place in the worst- mannered manner conceivable.

I shout for them to go away and eventually they do. It takes at least an hour for me to cry out. Then I just lay curled up on the bed, stroking the silken sheets with my hood, feeling him run through and out of me- watching the sunset over all the land- they all could see in, and the cam was flaking its red-light- right down where you could see my pinkie- kitty. That is what they asked for when sending in money to get sponsors. Being cute and hot sales to them- that what I was whispered in my mind by him over the way to his room.

In the early parts of the day at the stars, before that though, they will give me a score so low, no one in their right mind would sponsor me. That is what will happen tonight. Since the training is not open to viewers, the Tournament Producers announce a score for each player. I expect guards to come for me. Nevertheless, as time passes, it seems less likely. I calmed down. They still need a girl - from constituency 14, don't they? If the Tournament Producers want to punish me, they can do it publicly. Wait until I am in the arena and sic starving wild animals on me. You can bet they will make sure I do not have a bow and arrow to protect me. Also- with what I said before. It gives the audience a starting place for the betting that will continue throughout the starts.

I wish the stylists had not shown up because for some reason, I do not like the idea of substandard them. It is as if I have tossed away all the decent work they did at the opening ceremonies without a thought. I avoid looking at anyone as I take tiny spoonsful of potato soup. The saltiness reminds me of my tears. I had been anticipating my shooting skills might get me a six or a seven or more- like a ten, even if I am not particularly

powerful. Now I am sure I will have the lowest score of twenty-five. If no one sponsors me, my odds of staying alive decrease to zip.

(Back)

The walkout of the town as a star the others would spit- lap- bit and rip on us thinking there were higher up than us- we did this naked as the day we came into this hellish world. I Borough has gotten rid of us- like trash. We are the property of them- not a farce- they do not want us here or anywhere in these parts after our time is up- unless you are the winner- there weeding us out.

The walk was long and blasting on the feet- my sister saying you will make it back- no you will not on girl said. On the train, I sat- box cars- changed. I had to shove a tube up my LIKEWISE, - hidden way up in my ass- so far, I could feel it in my gut, and they thought was poop- with 1,000 or so of currency in it. You saw me take that out- gross right! 50% of us will pass the first day- you can make it if you have the cash!

Run- there is no one or place to go- money is the way out- one cut a girl got last night to get the cash out of her. Syaga was her... she was odd, to say the least. Famine was high- in the cars where they opened them and hosed you down boy and girls alike- still naked. Sleep was hard on the cars rocking down the skinny rail tracks- feeling every bump- with eyes over the way showing- I WANT TO KILL YOU.

Hot and cold in the blue and white cars- Steam and sound of highs over rolling hills. I was shanked on the hand and told by Syasa she would cut my head off if I did suck on her off. The march passes us we look- making a distraction- with a cut to a face-

some run for it going for the river over the way- yet they get some and smash their feet not killing them- that would be like killing a girl before banging her with yah did- just making sure they would never get away- hobbling they call it. One was shot- I did not even know her name- yet no one gives a rat's ass. The smalls of pigs and fish- rotting with humans- a head off over the way- too much- we walk into the camp are new home. Line up they yell at the head man; the drummer plays his death march.

The boy Sage is looking dumb with his mouth open.

You are- Jailers-

Rolls called out-

- The first time one tries to escape at 3 years of jail time- and the right to kill you without say. 2nd adds 2 more each time.
- Masturbate is a NO- something that you should do it drains strength unless a par team. Those that do well have- do this in front of a camera and say why they need it.
- Saving is done in 5 minutes by the hands of a staffer where you can shower for 15 minutes. We march around still unclothed as they all see... I was the one that wants to see the most is all pubescent.

Boys love that... so they can see it all!

There I was... until training.

All are chained down to their bad unless in a partnership. The hospitality was high- at some ran there too- killed with high power Tommy guns.

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I got my boy fast before I went here, yet I do love him. I- he was the crunch of my life anyway- I said to them in a chat... Permitted all Leah. The rat that said they would buy you out- is Tostito- give a long run and ways out- yet into a trap. A boy is dragging a dead girl by the hair no- still marching around to show how strong we are. I could hear the accordion music of my homeland playing in my mind as if I were a week yet not stopping.

I can get you a train- he would say to them- and you would get there, and it was a rusted out 1888, with parts missing. I had no choices the one said- if I stay in this hole- I will perish! She came back hobbled, and she killed herself staking her fist down her mouth.

Oh yeah- Yet not after doing these 5 times. We are going to break you! That is what they said to us as we got on the train here.

Zoie- I ran after her not caring about life- I was even placed in an open jail-like room for saying something to a trooper he did not like- where it would rain- or sun or more- no lights- bats and rats all over- I had

to poop in the corner. I was sent to Demise Island over in the triangle, you can see me here waking passing, I know I would not make it back to see if she is alive- yet I

know I might- if I stay strong and eat all they give I know that I can make it some- its jizz full- watery shit they give me.

When I pop my head out the steel doors. I said F-U- and got my food cut ½ of what it was!! I giggled crazily in the rain coming down... and when I shit- they do not like that closing off the top with a blackout plat.

I started eating bugs... The running the crawling was nuts in the mud- and woodlands. I even jumped off 1,200 feet (about 365.76 m) in the air. They would hold my head with a pipe to make me suffer- for being me. The girl that showed her what she needed to know. I look good hair falling out- I know I look okay- death not far- yet I must be strong for her- even if the odds are not in my favor. I rip my teeth out that were rotting.

A trooper would come in every night and fondle me- I could not do anything or more time was added. He would kiss me all over too- I fought some- yet gave in to get out. I saw a girl being dragged out by their legs, for them to have a good time- I was one- and yes, we all were stripped. This is what I get just for my blood type and heritage. Used as a -ho! I got tattoos; I did not want to... covering my arms.

I get 50 more nights- for yelling at the troopers for playing with myself, yet can you not- some say they do... lies? I am failing, and I know... that is okay if it is for her to live on.

(Forward)

After two years of this, I was a broken girl.

One was made a show- and the blade went down hard and fast- she was only five. The number, which is between one and twelve, one being irredeemably bad and twelve being unattainably high, signifies the promise of the try LIKEWISE. The mark is not a guarantee of which person will win. It is only an indication of the potential of a try LIKEWISE, shown in training.

Frequently, because of the variables in the actual arena, high scoring tries LIKEWISE, go down almost immediately. Just as a few years ago, the boy who won the Stars only received a three. Still, the scores can help or hurt individual stars in terms of sponsorship. I masticated that... I choose I may as well go.

The scores will be televised tonight. It is not like I can hide what happened forever. I go to the bathroom and wash my face, LIKEWISE, it is still red and splotchy. All and sundry waiting at the table, even Pahyai and Lattie. The adults began some chitchat about the weather forecast, and I let my eyes meet me and my boy. He raises his eyebrows. A question. What happened? I just give my head a small shake. Then, as they are serving the main course, I hear the reporter say, 'Okay, enough small talk, just how bad were you today?'

Somehow calling me sweetheart is off enough at this for an awe moment- that I am at least able to speak. 'I shot an arrow at the Tournament Producers to show what I can do in big crowds.' Everyone stopped eating when I shot the girls with one aero- as

they were moving. ‘You what?’ The horror in Gannah’s voice confirms my worst suspicions.

‘I shot an arrow at them. Not exactly at them. In their direction. It is like My boy said, I was shooting, and they were ignoring me and me just. I just lost my head, so I shot an apple out of their stupid roast pig’s mouth!’ I say defiantly.

‘And what did they say?’ says Cinna carefully.

‘Nothing. Or I do not know. I walked out after that,’ I say.

‘Without being dismissed?’ Gasps Gannah. ‘I dismissed myself,’ I said. I remember how I promised my sister that I really would try to win, and I feel like a ton of coal has dropped on me.

See they would have to reveal what happened in the Training Center for it to have any worthwhile effect on the population. People would need to know what you did. Likewise, they cannot sense it is secret, so it would be a waste of effort,’ says Gannah. ‘More likely they’ll make your life hell in the arena.’ ‘Well, they’ve already promised to do that to us anyway,’ says my strong brave man.’ Well, that is that’ says Gannah.

Then he LIKEWISE, terms into a roll.

‘Do you think they’ll arrest me?’ I ask.

‘Doubt it... be a pain to replace you at this stage,’ says Gannah.

‘What about my household...?’ I speak.

‘Will they discipline them...?’

‘Do not think so- have them show the spread eagle...?’

(Giggling) the many- many- people, in the stadium.

It would not make much sense.

‘Very Leah,’ says Gannah. And I realize the impossible has happened. They cheered me up. Gannah picks up a pork chop with his fingers, which makes Gannah frown, and dunks it in his wine.

He rips off a hunk of meat and starts to chuckle. ‘What were their faces like?’ I can feel the edges of my mouth tilting up. ‘Shocked. Terrified. Uh, preposterous, some of them.’ Pop into my mind. ‘One man tripped backward into a bowl of punch.’

Gannah guffaws and we all start laughing except Gannah, although even she is suppressing a smile. ‘Well, it serves them right. It is their job to pay attention to you. And just because you come from Borough Twelve is no excuse to ignore you.’ Then her eyes dart around as if she is saying something outrageous. ‘I’m sorry, LIKEWISE, that’s what I think,’ she says to no one in precise. ‘I’ll get an awfully bad score,’ I say. ‘Scores only matter if they are particularly good, no one pays much attention to the bad or mediocre ones.’

My family is safe... right?

Time to go- you...dah...

Next time you see me- I grin at him and realize that I am starving. I cut off a piece of pork, dunk it in mashed potatoes, and start eating. It is okay.

Plus, if they are safe- I do not feel they are, no actual harm has been done- they say to me in my mind- with a snicker- that I did not like- yet- what could I do about it?

I chatted with my boy he said-

‘People use that tactic,’ he said to me. ‘I hope that’s how people interpret the four I’ll probably get,’ tells me. ‘If that. Is anything less impressive than watching a person pick up a heavy ball and throw it a couple of yards? One landed on my foot... or toe.’

After dinner, we go to the sitting room to watch the scores announced on television. First, they show a photo of the truth- and fallen- LIKEWISE, then flash their score below it. Most of the other players average a six. Surprisingly, little Permitted produces a seven. I do not know what she showed the judges, LIKEWISE, she is so tiny it must have been impressive. The Career LIKEWISE, - naturally get in the eight-to-ten range.

Constituency 14 comes up last, as usual. He pulls a five, the lowest of all boy- it is all the sex they giggle- so at least a couple of the Tournament Producers must have been watching him. I dig my fingernails into my palms as my face comes up, expecting the worst. Then they flash the number eleven on the screen. Everybody is slapping me on the ass and cheering and congratulating me- on getting F-ed and going to die for not have a real man.

Nevertheless, it does not seem real.

‘There must be a mistake- I think with the- OH SHIT look on my face. How? How- could that happen...?’ I asked Gannah.

At dawn, I lie in bed for a while, watching the sun come up on a beautiful morning. It is on Sunday. A day off at home. I wonder if my sisters -is- well or not- in the woods yet, I knew that they would do something like that it came around to me.

‘Melisa, the girl with a shy spirit,’ says Jannah and hugs me.

Jannah is an old friend of Gannah her gay girlfriend and that is not allowed either in the stars- or they would be a couple one reason, they were picked to wipe out their gay ways- a sickness as they say- just like our stars. Naughtily... they kiss- saying kill us!

And they did the next time we chatted, yet they were hand and hand- and in love- or so they said. One girl said that is better than dying for Jesus... No comment- yet I have some faith.

My man- and I congratulate each other for making it this far, another awkward moment- as we make out... saying are dreams if we make it- knowing one must die- We’ve both done well, LIKEWISE, what does that mean for the other? I escape to my room as quickly as possible and burrow down under the covers. The stress of the day, particularly the crying, has worn me out. I drifted off, relieved, and with the number eleven still flashing behind my eyelids.

I had been struggling along on my own for about six months when I first ran into Bale in the woods. It was a Sunday in October, the air cool and pungent with dying things. I had spent the morning competing with the squirrels for nuts, and the slightly warmer afternoon wading in shallow ponds harvesting Melisa.

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The boy- The only meat I would shoot was a squirrel, which had practically run over my toes, in its quest for acorns, nevertheless, the animals would still be afoot, when the snow buried my other food sources. Having strayed further than afield than usual, I was speeding up back home, lugging my burlap sacks when I came across a dead rabbit. I had been trying to use snares all summer with no success, so I could not help dropping my sacks to examine this one.

That is risky...’ My fingers were just on the wire above one of the rabbits when a voice rang out. ‘It was hanging by its neck in a thin wire a foot above my head. About fourteen yards away was another.

What she said to do- ‘That you cannot believe a little girl from Borough fourteen has done this well. The whole thing has been more than you ever could have dreamed of. Talk about my clothes. How nice the people are...? How the city amazes you... say what you love- If you will not talk about yourself, at least complement the audience. Just keep turning it back around, all right.’

I am familiar with twitch-up snares because my father used them. When the prey is caught, it is jerked into the air out of the reach of other starving animals. I brought it back for her- and that was when love started.

Melisa- The next hours are agonizing. At once, it is clear I cannot gush. We try to make ourselves overconfident, LIKEWISE, I just do not have arrogance.

I am too 'defenseless' for ferociousness, I am not witty, humorous, erotic, and secretive- like you.

~*~

At the Starvation Tournament part of the Stars, at every living being in the Bureau by marvelous dishes around my room. When the girl with the rainbow hair comes in to turn down my bed, her eyes widen at the mess. 'Just leave it!' I yelled at her. 'Just leave it alone!' I hate her, I never hated anyone, or anything till now- too, with her knowing reproachful eyes that call me a coward, a monster, a puppet of the Bureau, both now and then. For her, justice must finally be fashionable.

Why am I letting her? At least my death will help pay for the life of the boy in the woods. Likewise, instead of fleeing the room, the girl closes the door behind her and goes to the bathroom. She comes back with a damp cloth and wipes my face gently then cleans- the blood from a broken plate off my hands. Why is she doing this? She shakes her head. 'I should have tried to save you,' I whisper. Does this mean we were right to stand by? Has she forgiven me? 'No, it was wrong,' I say. She taps her lips making them

wet, with her fingers then points to my chest with her knife. She means that I would just have ended dead. When we move on...

I spent the next hour helping the girl that has taken a liking to me in a sexual cleaning sea and I am room. For sex, and to get on the good side of me- I play along not trusting her- is just sex, right?

Cleaning away is all that makes us little girls in a room, she turns down my bed. I crawl in between the sheets like a five-year-old and let her tuck me in. Then she gets in with me- and the fun starts for her- I want her to stay until I fall asleep- I never like sleeping alone anyway- I always sleep with my sister. Yet she is taking time away from me and my lover- I get it so does he- to be there when I wake up. I want the protection of this girl, even though she never had mine.

In the morning, it is not the girl LIKEWISE, my prep team who is hanging over me. I remember my lessons with my sisters in my mind.

Huge bright blue eyes, full red lips, lashes that throw off bits of light when I blink. Finally, they cover my entire body in a powder that makes me shimmer in the lights. Then Melia goes to work on my hair, weaving strands of red into a pattern that begins at my left ear, wraps around my head, and then falls in one braid down my right shoulder. The team works on me until late afternoon, turning my skin to glowing satin, stenciling patterns on my arms, painting flame designs on my twenty perfect nails. They erase my face with a layer of pale makeup and draw my features back out.

He walks in- with us two girls- ‘Close your eyes girls,’ he orders. Me- I can feel the silken inside as they slip it down over my stark- naked body, then the weight for his callouts of what he wanted to do with me after he did what he wanted with her. I clutch her hand rubbing my- hand as I blindly touch my goodies, glad to find there are at least two inside. There are some adjusting and jiggling. Then silence... and the end for the first. With just the girls as he and the viewers looking!

Freak me, I yell! He crawls up between my legs where he stops to rid me of my sodden panties. He slings it away carelessly, his eyes never leaving the bare place they covered. He continues to stare, licking his lips— obviously beyond aroused by the sight LIKEWISE, there is nothing to hide my intimate folds and I feel exposed, squirming, and certain that my blush reaches down there. He takes his sweet, torturous time - enjoying his private viewing commotion. He makes no move to touch me LIKEWISE, the ravenous molds his face is pushing me to run up onto him with wild desire, taking his time. I shift response with desolate moments.

With my body on top of his, I stroked my hand over the sprinkling of stubble, on- easily with myself with every curve and dip of his face. You are so precious, thank you for taking another chance on me. Laying in his chest with my head- while he grips my inner thighs, pushing them apart. Keep still or I will make you- then he kisses my lips and the other set. I gasp at his challenging threat and on pure instinct and raw desire, my hips tilt up by their own accord, crazy in their need for any contact.

My legs are bent with my knees resting on either side of his head. My bottom sits on his chest, taking my weight, which leaves my secret opening utterly gaping and

vulnerable, not to mention close to his sinful mouth. I can feel his breath on me, fluttering and making my heart stutter. His hands slip around, cupping my backside as he pushes me into him for the sex that was about to be made, inhaling deeply like what I feel inside me. Besides what she already had. Did I care yes- LIKEWISE, I want to live off at night and I need a girlfriend too here.

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The night before the stars- all the girls in their fancy dress all colors and shapes. 'I have to, I'm dizzy!' I am also giggling, which I think I have never done in my lifetime.

Likewise, the nerves and the spinning have gotten to me. My boy- wraps a protective arm around me. 'Do not worry, I have you. Cannot have you following in your mentor's footsteps.' He is the one- that I love here just so you know that- yet I am girl

I will try anything once even girls... I kissed a girl, and it was okay... I said to them passing out like... for what that all though it is not that bad- mom and dad it what happens with girls this age! They are going to get Freaked- that is the times- just ask MTV- the show and the music.

I- you find this affiance stop viewing moms and dads, I am sure your kid would say what wrong with this? There was not much said- I am sure I no more than you do at my age in sex- like most girls my age! If you do like it do something else- yet I assure you- which your kid will not- and say your nuts, for not letting them look at me- for there doing just what I am- and as of this year, it is right.

~*~

More chatting with the interviewers- Woot- woot is all I hear as I stand there looking at them all! They like me, they like me. I swallow hard. ‘She asked me to try hard to win.’ The audience is frozen, hanging on my every word. ‘And what did you say?’ prompts Caesar gently. Nevertheless, instead of warmth, an icy rigidity takes over my body.

‘I bet you did,’ says your lovers a, a squeeze. The buzzer goes off- saying no. My muscles tense as they do before a kill just to show that I could- Kill is okay to this world- yet saying- Freak is not- and ripping her heart out is okay too? Yet some light sex is not I asked- they were like shocked by that one- something I should not have questioned... why? When I speak, my voice seems to have gone up an octave. ‘I swore I would do this and not be right.’ They all gapped- like I should not have... why? It is not the 1900’s anymore or the 2000s- get what I mean- I said to them in my mind- they said to drop it. As we cut to a break.

Talk about this perfect love you have for him? His eyes his face, his body... and nothing else... do not say what you feel I said in my mind? They did not like that... I was not whining points for saying what I wanted and that was a boy banging me in the night- as a real girl would do. Pissed- I shyly get up that what they want a shy girl with a fake smile on her face- ‘Sorry we are out of time, yet that is me- LIKEWISE, come on here...

What do you want to see? I asked- on brake...

Death?

Lust?

Killing?

Or me?

Where are my Life and Love- come in- it is all for you, and I feel cheated- and then they said remember whom you are a nine-year star... Your dead to us either way.

They make me not me... just a program of what they want.

A heel like applause continues long after I am seated back with the others. I looked at Sani for comfort, and she looked at me like what. He gives me a side thumb as I walk to him. Sani is a boy that makes sure I do not F- it up. What happened to be sweet? I said I just did not feel like it today... Hello- I am NINE-YEAR-OLD- girl! I feel like crying! Best of luck, Melisa Elizabeth Elosteen, the star girl from region 14.'

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I am still in a daze... sitting through his interview. He has the audience from the get they not sure about him like- go, though; I can hear them laughing at him for not having just one girl, shouting out. He got the same question and went into detail of- how he banged this girl- and that was okay for he is a boy... and boys can have sex with anyone and that a-okay- yet a girl is a slut- if she thinks about it. No respect for girls at all in the tournament. Or in our lives as girls! I knew he had to say this- yet I was not contented.

A shake of his head said to me to not- think about it, I was turn off to him, so I would not talk for him... There must be some special girl right what one? Come on, what is her name?' says the man in black- Um- she over there he points.

Sounds of understanding from the crowd-

Why her...? ...?

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'I don't know... Likewise, none of the boys/girls like her for whom she is,' he says. 'So, here is what you do. You win, you go home. She may not be there or the other way around?' The man said discouragingly. I- I- a – do not know... oh my...! ...?

For a moment, the cameras hold on him down casting on his eyes as what he says sinks in. Then I can see my face, mouth half opens in a mixture with surprise and complaint, overblown on every screen as I realize, me... He means me... right? I press my lips together and stare at the floor, hoping this will conceal the emotions starting to boil up inside of me. I never knew at that time... the girl that was shown and since I would not look up, they never said. That was the punishment- with a head in my mind.

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I take a shower and scrub the gold paint, the makeup, the scent of beauty from my body. All that remains of the design- the team's efforts are the flames on my nails. I strip all that is fake and gay to me of my body rapping all the places- that you should not see- yet you do. Brush my teeth- hair- and the underwire is put on with PJs until

bedtime... was I slip out... I do some reading- and see the news that I do not want to see about everything and the world all crazy. I see the hell that we live in, and I do not want to- yet they make me. There is only one hour was there not feeling the inside of me- or hearing my every emotion.

It will give me something to hold on to in the days to come. I pull on a thick, fleecy nightgown and climb into bed. It takes me about five seconds to realize I will never fall asleep. And I need sleep very much, because in the arena every moment I give in to fatigue will be an invitation to death. It is no good. One hour, two, three passes, and my eyelids refuse to get heavy. I cannot stop trying to imagine exactly what terrain I will be thrown into.

Return...? Marsh...?

A frigid inhospitable- surroundings...?

I am hoping for trees, which may afford me some means of concealment, food, and shelter, Often- there are trees, for the cause that barren landscapes are dull glum yet awe-inspiring- and the Tournament resolves too quickly without them. On the other hand, what will the climate be like?

Questioned- What traps have the Tournament Producers had burrow to liven up the slower moments? As well as then there is my fellow esteem.

The more anxious I am to find sleep, the more it eludes me. Finally, I am too restless to even stay in bed. I pace the floor, heart beating too fast, breathing hard- yet not

holding it in. My room feels like a prison cell to me as I said. Worse than what I know she had- yet not at all. It is all in my mind imprisonment. That is spooky!

The idea of being strong for someone else has never entered their heads, I find myself in the position of having to console them. Since I am the person going to be slaughtered, this is annoying.

I ran down the hall saying, I had enough- to the door- to the roof- I went not allowed- LIKEWISE, I am there. It is not only unlocked LIKEWISE, ajar so how is going to stop me- I see them adding traps and things out for us- they will not know I was on my time. Something that they never thought of is how I piled all this on my time to win.

The plan that they cannot get into- for I have coded something my dad made for us when this was added in me- he said they do not need to know all your life. My dad was somewhat of an inventor- also on this site as a hobby.

Yet there is a lot of chatting here- nothing is far in the tournament- we all play dirty- there are no roles just kill- the one you see and knock them out! My sisters are the ones that worked for this moment not me- so what was it I got from her the day I left home this code of how to do this... just by putting my forehead to hers and scanning it all in. I want to see the sky and how the day is going to go and so on- the moon with the stars- on the last night that no one will be hunting me- that why I know where I am.

Like a compass, all I must do is look at the time on my hand to get north now.

I knew that all I needed was a piece of my hair in with a magnetically charged paperclip and I had the same thing, something I ripped off one of the desks. Along with other trivial things like a flint rock and the back of my knife. Smock, you die for them seeing you- yet you can live without it in the bush. The first thing you need is water- not killing... I know this they do not. Food I good for three weeks...

I will find what I can- yet I know there is not much out there. You kill the tournament, and you are going to be eaten by them at night. Your sent will kill you fast in the bush them hunting you. A tree living it is not working for me- yet some say they think that would work- I say no- two words- BIG cats. We are not at the top of the food chain here- replying is something I need to know- she did- I did not LIKEWISE, I have it all!

Everything I need to know... for that, I will always be edited. And I think- some knew this and that is why she is where she is... LIKEWISE, they had to see if I would make it. The what-if...!

My thoughts- You know, you could live a thousand lifetimes and not deserve him. My nightmares are usually about losing you. I am okay once I realize you are here. I realize only one person will be damaged beyond repair if he dies is- me! I am so sorry,' I whisper. I leaned forward and kissed him. I turn and put my lips close to him and drop my eyelids in imitation... 'He offered me sugar and wanted to know all my secrets,' I say in my best seductive voice. His eyelashes flutter and he look at me through a haze of opiates.

‘Thought you’d be gone by now,’ he says. He tilts his forehead down to rest against mine and pulls me closer. His skin, his whole being radiates heat from being so near the fire, and I close my eyes, soaking in his warmth. I breathe in the smell of snow dampened leather and smoke and apples, the smell of all those wintry days we shared before the Tournament. I do not try to move away.

Why should I anyway? His voice drops to a whisper. ‘I love you.’

That is why...

I look at him and he gives me a sad smile. I hear all their voices. ‘You could do a lot worse.’ At this moment, it is impossible to imagine how I could do any better. The gift...it is perfect. So, when I rise on my tiptoe to kiss him, it does not seem forced at all.

My choices are simple. I can die like a quarry in the woods, or I can die here beside you now, then, or forever. ‘I am not going anywhere. I am going to stay right here- even if I am not there I am in your mind and memory forever.’ Always!

Always you... Stars.

31

You- I would fight for... he said to me... I wish I could freeze that moment, right here, right now, and live in it forever.’

Because I am selfish, I am a coward, I am the kind of girl who, when she might be of use, would run to stay alive and leave those who could not follow to suffer and die. There is nothing up here to me likewise, stars and the moon, that is all I need to see and

the treetops. I am sure they see me- yet I am on my time... My feet move soundlessly across.

‘It not always that I can turn my mind off,’ I say- when I hear it snap on in my mind and I walking back in and here my boy’s voice plays softly inside. ‘Thinking about your family he said?’ he asks. Why would you ask me that- I said frantically question if I said far too much in my retrieving?

‘No,’ I admit a bit guiltily. ‘All I can do is wonder about tomorrow. Which is pointless, of course.’ In the light from below, I can see his face now, the awkward way he holds his bandaged hands. ‘I am sorry about your hands.’ ‘It doesn’t matter; you were off for a long time it seemed to me’ he says. ‘I have never- ever been a contender in these stars nevertheless.’ Why did you ask me... anyways...?

I want to die as myself, to not having them plan that too, yet this is all parts of their tournament.

There were just moments where I thought you were far out there in your thoughts or so they said too. Yet it was like you just blacked out. (That’s what I wanted them to think. overloading everything this is in my mind.) My best hope is to not humiliate myself over this... and. ‘He hesitates, all the time I said too much... like I what thief to something- tacking away from him... and got away with it- as I did them, I knew I could not say anything to him, or they would surely get it... so wrong right?

‘And what do you what to know maybe I did blackout?’ I speak. ‘I do not know how to say it exactly. How I feel about all this- my family is grown now- I no!

Only me and you-you must take this place and be there for me- that is what I need from you.

Does that make any sense to you? I ask... I shake my head, yes and he gets it, all we have at this point is each other's as we hug our own body's feel like we are hugging. How could he die as anyone LIKEWISE, himself or as me with him- or them?

'I do not want them to change me... from the inside out. Turn me into horrid kill, which I am not wanting to be.'

I bite my lip feeling inferior... like always in my past days of days and times of times. While I have been ruminating on the availability of trees and looking for love to show the way- he has been struggling with how to maintain his identity as us. His purity for me is what is driving me to keep going.

I feel you! All of you now and forever! He spoke.

32

I locked my blue eyes into him, demanding an answer- do you love me?

Yes- truly! He said- I knew in his thought that was real.

I smiled at him, sad and thrilled. Okay, be my sweetheart and kiss me on the rooftop under the stars. And we ran and did just that not caring what they said.

I will always- Then I turn and leave the roof. I spend the rest of the night slipping in and out of a dozing out, imagining the cutting remarks I will make on him to

kill him out of the fact I have to in the morning of the next day. I do not want to kill this boy... I love him... cannot they see that- it is sick to me and him?

~*~

There are no rules in the arena, LIKEWISE, anthropophagy does not play well with the Bureau audience, so they tried to head it off. Just KILL! And see who stands as last- there is no timing- it could be one day or one year. It has happened.

33

The ride to me I might as well have been in a coffin lasts about half an hour before the windows blackout, suggesting that we are nearing the arena.

The flying ships overhand the lands of Zarnesboro, and I go back to the ranking, only this time it leads down into a cylinder subversive, into the catacombs that lie beneath the arena. That is where it all opened to the world, they made for us- it is part of the land yet under them workings... up and you are over the arced fizz of web almost virtual programed control-ness.

The whole thing is brand- new to me- all- everything- the land and how it looks the sent and the air seeming thinner, a fast train moved over my head, and with clear like tracks under it with care posts under. Fans, I would say that they want to see all this for the stadium.

The only thing the same is the faces popping up with the look of kill coming at me- there is no call out when these stars pop up and run.

I struggle to keep my breakfast down. We are on a flat, open stretch of ground. A plain of hard death that is gross to look at if you can slow down to see if- it has made to be that way for a tea's- lush Pandora is the fifth moon of the gas giant Polyphemus (both are figures in Greek mythology,) which orbits Alpha Centauri A in the Alpha Centauri star system, the closest star system to our sun. Everything glances at the light in colors you have never seen before with your eyes.

‘Why not? You saved me with those bugs. You are smart enough to still be alive. And I cannot seem to shake you anyway,’ I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide. ‘You hungry?’ I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the meat. ‘Come on then, I’ve had two kills today.’ Permitted tentatively steps out into the open. ‘I can fix your stings.’ ‘Can you?’ I ask. ‘How?’ She digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I am almost certain they are the ones my mother uses. ‘Where’d you find those?’

‘Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there,’ says Leah. ‘There is a lot here, too.’

‘That is right. You are Area Eleven. Cultivation,’ I say. ‘Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you have wings.’ Permitted smiles. I have landed on one of the few things she will admit pride in. ‘Well, come on, then, fix me up.’

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, permitted places the handful of leaves into her mouth and began to chew

them. My mother would use other methods, LIKEWISE, it is not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Permitted presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

‘Oh-wait.’ The sound comes out of my mouth before I can stop it. It is as if the leaves are leaching the pain right out of the sting.

Permitted giggles. ‘Lucky you had the sense to pull the stingers out or you’d be a lot worse.’ ‘Do my neck! Do my cheek!’ I almost begged.

Permitted stuffs another handful of leaves in her mouth, and soon I am laughing, because the relief is so sweet. I noticed a long burn on my Permitted forearm. ‘I’ve got something for that.’ I set aside my weapons and anointed her arm with the burning medicine. ‘You have good guarantors,’ she says longingly. ‘You weren’t joking about wanting me for an ally?’ she asks. ‘Have you gotten anything yet?’ I asked her to shake her head- no.

‘You will, though- watch. The closer we get to the end; the more people will realize how ingenious you are.’ I turn the meat over. ‘No, I meant it,’ I say. I can almost hear Sam- groaning as I team up with this wispy child. Likewise, I want her. Because she is a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of my sister.

‘Okay,’ she says, and holds out her hand. We shake. ‘It’s a deal.’ Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, LIKEWISE, neither of us mentions that. She says sometimes a flock will wander into the orchard and they get a decent lunch that day. For a while, all conversation stops as we fill our stomachs. Gosling has a delicious meal

that is so fatty, the grease drips down your face when you bite into it. Permitted is a big handful of some starchy roots to the meal. Roasted over the fire, they have the sharp sweet taste of a parsnip. She recognizes the bird, too, some wild thing they call a gosling in her Borough.

‘Oh,’ says Permitted with a sigh. ‘I’ve never had a whole leg to myself before.’ I will bet she has not. I will bet meat hardly ever comes her way. ‘Take the other,’ I say.

‘Categorically?’

‘Take whatever you want. Now that I have a bow and arrows, I can get more. Plus- I have snares. I can show you how to set them,’ I say. Permitted still looks uncertainly at the leg. ‘Oh, take it,’ I say, putting the drumstick in her hands. ‘It will only last a few days anyway, and we’ve got the whole bird plus the rabbit.’ Once she has hold of it, her appetite wins out and she takes a huge mouthful.

Her eyes widened. ‘Oh, no, we’re not allowed to eat the crops.’ ‘I would have thought, in area 11, you would have a bit more to eat than us. You know, since you grow the food,’ I say. ‘They arrest you or something?’ I asked.

‘They whip you and make everyone else watch,’ says Leah. ‘The mayor’s extremely strict about it.’

Also, our mayor, Madge’s father, does not seem to have much taste for such events. Maybe being the least prestigious, poorest, most laughed at Borough in the country has its advantages. Such as, being ignored by the Bureau if we produce our coal quotas.

I can tell by her expression that it is not that uncommon an occurrence. Public whipping's a rare thing in quarter 14, although occasionally one occurs. Technically, Permitted and I could be whipped daily for poaching in the woods- well, technically, we could get a whole lot worse- except all the officials buy our meat.

'Do you get all the coal you want?' she asks.

'No,' I answer. 'Just what we buy and whatever we track in on our boots.'

It is enigmatic, my sisterly, and terrifying. Even from orbit, the scope of flora present on the surface designates a moon brimming with life. They added more moons just to play with us- yet I know the Earth one.

Other than the richness of varying colors, the trees resemble those of Earth. They have familiar trunks, branches, and leaves, though due to the difference in gravity, many of the shapes appear strange to humans and the proportions are greater because of the lower gravity. The trees and plant life of Zansboro have formed links to the mental connections between their roots that link us and the troops and effectively act as neurons, creating a moon-wide 'brain' that has been achieved, by the chip.

Larger than Earth it feels- this is like a tournament where you are the fighter lost in the world that made- it is not a real place to others- yet we have heard about it- like a stadium- out in this world. With what I would call wraparound screen that never- where you can see things they say and want you to do- was it never- ever seem to end- where you are all lost within- where you feel this is all real- yet the bloodshed is for actual.

You are just one small pixel in a big sea of gaming and entertainment. Looks like a lush paradise standard during the day, LIKEWISE, at night, virtually all life on the moon exhibits bioluminescent qualities in various shades of blue, purple, and green, which provides them better camouflage at night on Zarnsboro. I can see nothing, after running fast and far I run to a steep downward slope or even cliff. To my right lies a lake. To my left and back, sparse pine woods.

Run- run- run... for what I thought was forever.

I hear his instructions in my head. 'Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water also now I need to clean it.'

I heard in my mind Jump- I am not far behind you... so I did into the water I want. Swimming over I stopped, and made a fire, I had to with it now night and dropping off down to 32° when just five or so minutes ago it was 99° Fahrenheit. I see him running for me- the lip was made- over the high falls- where a wolf was chasing him- that did not make the jump.

35

Zoie- 'I once told you- if one gets out it's a victory-'

Melisa- She said that to me also when I said how do I when or get away. So-o in other words, we all could die, and no one would give a shit.

Nevertheless, it is tempting, so tempting, when I see the bounty waiting there before me. And I know that if I do not get it, someone else will. That the Career tries LIKEWISE, who survives the bloodbath will divide up most of these life-sustaining spoils. Something caught my eye. There, resting on a mound of blanket rolls is a silver sheath of arrows and a bow, already strung, just waiting to be engaged. That is mine, I think. It is meant for me.

I am fast... I can sprint faster than any of the girls in our school although a couple can beat me in distance races. LIKEWISE, this forty-yard length, this is what I am built for. I know I can get it; I know I can reach it first, LIKEWISE, then the question is how quickly can I get out of there? By the time I have scrambled up the packs and grabbed the weapons, others will have reached the horn, and one or two I might be able to pick off, LIKEWISE, say there's a dozen, at that close range, they could take me down with the spears and the clubs. Or their powerful fists.

The hijacking I call it- before the tournament, some tried to run get a train that was passing in the night- others- I remember and had played in my mind the one that ran- that tried escaping on the rail line. What they did was tunnel their way out- making a hole in the boxcar, and dripping their body down on the ties, feet dragging on and the cars would all pass LIKEWISE, the last was they had to roll over the tracks in-between the wheels. In the car Jarrah- said let us see that rope- the rope is something we all have it is so needed. Even if just one of these bracelets... cute the girl said when she was trying to strangle another girl out like she was a guard... on the top of the tram... Do you have a better plane than a girl? Yes- let us see the rope- it when around her neck as he made two

notes- there the notes there smash the joints in nick- dead in 15 seconds. They did it they killed all the troopers on top of the train- and made the drive or the train go an alternative way off to freedom or so they thought.

Over the tallest viaduct in the world 3,000 feet (about the height of the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world) in the air- they got rid of all the bodies... the one boy rolling his eyes were not there uniform, like the rest of them that could. Planes were flown into bomb or gunned down the runners as they go for a small-town call Knox in Italy for freedom on the Kane line bypass. They fired back LIKEWISE; it was 100 of them out of 3,000 of them.

~*~

Rip out of my thought- Get the weapon he said- that was the next part making it to where they have my stuff. And that was 5,280 feet (about half the height of Mount St. Helens) always. From the starting line. Where we all must meet up- yet that the tournament- no we must get this with them about to kill with bare hands.

The very weapon that might be my salvation, I have small hands- I no- yet with her past training in my mind I have the power. And with this rope I killed my first eight-year-old girl- that was looking at me for trust- I lied saying I would not do that to her- yet this is a tournament of life or death, not trust- she was going to kill me- remember that... did I want to NO- did I have to yes. She was so cute- I made sure that she remembered... giving her the moment in my mind that played in all the minds around in the land that I made the kill- a sacrifice of life so we can live.

(Thank you for your blood- and breath- now it is mine to have. Not- forgotten, the crowd makes their hand moment- like a wave then placing it on their heart and kissing her goodbye. This is what our area does anyway.) We will not have peace here, not fighting, yet some parts are an uprising, and that is where you get wiped off the planet.

And I only see one bow on her, and I get it- yet I can do that as I make my way to the point, of the Permitted first phase- of this long drawn out tournament- I know the minute must be almost up for me to get what I want from her and will have to decide what my strategy will be, right to make- to get there I am off my path now I know after the fight this girl off me... running and playing cat and mouse with her... and I find myself positioning my feet to run, not away into the stir rounding forests toward the falls, I hope that is right to get back to where I started.

Yet, I know I will run into all of them that may have their shit now- so what do- I do- run without? I also have now a small thumb handgun, pink with a white grip- something I keep from her forever, I knew if I win that would be something I would treasure- I undressed her seeing what I could find- it what you do when you get a kill- down in her undies in the front was this gun, deep up in her vajayjay the hand was out some point downward, and I tore it out and now have it in my handbag- good hiding spot why didn't I think of that? And one round in the gun. I wonder if that is meant for my head.

Is it a choice, no? She did care if it when off inside her why would she? So, you pack things where you have the holes... on the thing, girls have over the boys. Now I

need a knife to see what shoved up their guts for that end- we- no. I know they have this investigated- yet if you have the money, you can pack hidden things like that there... I do not have the money. A hidden gun in the puss- puss- they all say wow or something like that- they went nuts at how clever that was- the reporter said- not good enough if you cannot fire it the man said on the screen, or the other girl would have been dead. How that girl is living is hard for me to get... to John Sha-Long to Steven Hung-dong. We like that girl did not we said Steven a real cutie- what was her last name Hard-cock? No- Sharcock- yah that it- Yah-ha Sharcock- she was a cute one with dr-a-ck, yet some roses tints look to her hair in the sunlight- and green eyes- not blue- and so not brown like the others. With a thin look.

I know I must kill a weak girl to get more than is the next one, I am weak I know it killing this young girl, I never thought I would be able to do such a thing.

When suddenly I notice my boy on his way, he is about five-run boys look for what I am, the shit we need- to not die- to my right I see one wanting to jump me, and he did- my boy slit his hand off- quite a fair distance I see more, still I can tell he is looking at me or my man, and I think he might be shaking his head at what my man did for me- after killing the other girl, they, he may have liked before all this took place.

The one he wanted- if he wins... Likewise, the suns in my eyes and I see nothing LIKEWISE, my man loving eyes in mine I feel safe if only for that moment and the moment was gone to fast, and while I am perplexing over it the gong rings out. I was no at this point given his ring- something he said I need to prove to him, and what I said to him also- and that was killing a child- to show that would never betray one- another

and the other way around- we killed each other now- where have the promise- a band to show for it. It must rock hearts in it with our names- and it is gold, he is just a gold band with our names. Yong, I went like a woman now- yet I have not even had my first period, and there are making that happen tonight. Like all the other girls- to be as they call it far- in a tournament that not.

More blood funny, no?

36

And I have missed it the rounds to my heart and hand! I have missed it by not much!

Because that extra couple of seconds, I have lost by seeing my dream of living in the days to come- by not being ready... for all this... I need to eat... so I grab him, and we both shuffle our feet for a moment, confused at the direction my brain wants to take... of what is next, and then he swipes me off my forward in his arms, tucking the sheet of plastic and a loaf of bread that was tucked in my top I eat as he runs in the woods, and I feed him some to bits and pieces.

The pickings are so small, and I am so angry with my boy for distracting me that I sprinted twenty yards to retrieve a bright orange backpack that could hold anything because I cannot stand living with anything.

A boy, I think from Area 9, reaches the pack at the same time I do and for a brief time we grapple with it and then he coughs, splattering my face with blood.

I stagger back, repulsed by the warm, sticky spray. Then the boy slips to the ground. That is when I see the knife in his back. Already others- LIKEWISE, have reached Copiousness and are spreading out to attack.

Yes, the girl from Area 2, ten yards away, running toward me, one hand clutching a half-dozen knives. I have seen her throw in training. She never misses. And I am her next target.

I was right they now have more than me... what to do... All the general fear I have been feeling condenses into an immediate fear of this girl, this predator who might kill me in seconds.

Arena shoots through me and I sling the pack over one shoulder and run full speed for the woods. I can hear the blade whistling toward me and reflexively hike the pack up to protect my head.

The blade lodges in the pack. Both straps on my shoulders now, I make for the trees. Somehow- I know the girl will not pursue me. That she will be drawn back into Copiousness before all the good stuff is gone. A grin crosses my face. Thanks for the knife, I think.

At the edge of the woods, I turn for one instant to survey the field. About a dozen or so try LIKEWISE, are riding out away at one another at the horn. Several lie dead already on the ground.

Those who have taken flight are disappearing into the trees or the void opposite me. I continue running until the woods have hidden me from the other try

LIKEWISE, then slow into a steady jog that I think I can maintain for a while. For the next few hours, I alternated between jogging and walking, putting as much distance as I could between myself and my competitors. I lost my bread during the struggle with the boy from Borough 7 LIKEWISE, managed to stuff my plastic in my sleeve, and so as I walk- I fold it effortlessly and tuck it into a pocket.

I also free the knife- it is a fine one with a long sharp blade, saw-like near the handle, which will make it handy for sawing through things- and slide it into my belt.

I do not dare stop observing the contents of the pack yet. I just keep moving, pausing only to check for pursuers.

I can go for a long time. I know that from my days in the woods.

Nevertheless, I will need water. Instructions in my mind were given, and since I botched the first, I keep a sharp eye out for any sign of it. No luck... I have other than his love.

The woods begin to evolve, and the pines are intermixed with a diversity of trees, some I identified, some completely foreign to me. At one point, I heard a noise and pulled my knife, thinking I may have to defend myself, LIKEWISE, I have only startled a rabbit- that I got my using an aero.

‘Good to see you,’ I whispered... If there is one rabbit, there could be hundreds just waiting to be snared.

The ground declines down some as you can see here. I do not particularly like this too much. Gorges make me feel trapped as I look up at the viaduct and nowhere, I am now at or so I think. I want to be high, like in the hills around Area 14, where I can see my rivals' forthcoming. However, I have no choice LIKEWISE, to keep going running like a hillbilly-hell.

Funny though, I do not feel too bad.

The days of guzzling with the coffin paid off. I have staying power even though I am short on sleep though I feel it. I feel him going in and out on me too in my mind. Being in the woods is refreshing. I am glad for the loneliness, even though it is a misapprehension, because I am on-screen right now.

I feel it not looking cute LIKEWISE, yet sweet to them looking at how to sleep the little one is... the joke made about tucking me and giving me a bedtime story.

Not unswervingly LIKEWISE, off and on. There are so many decreases to show the first day, down to 60- that honor for the stars still standing- hiking through the woods is not much to look at in the day LIKEWISE, at night it is who-o-Wah.

Even so, they will show me enough to let individuals know I am alive, intact, and on the travel. One of the substantial days of betting is the opening when the initial wounded come in. Conversely, that cannot compare to what happens as the field shrinks to a handful of players.

It is late-night and the ground is a wondrous sight when I begin to hear the cannons. Each shot represents a dead try LIKEWISE. The fighting must have finally

stopped at Copiousness. They never- ever assemble the massacre bodies until the killers have been isolated.

On an opening day, they do not even fire the cannons until the initial fighting's over for the motive that it is too hard to keep track of the death toll.

I allow myself to pause, panting, wheezing, and puffing as I count the shots.

One, two, and three... on and on until they reach eleven. Eleven dead in all 59 stands. All the names I could care less about there just kill me... My fingernails scrape at the dried blood the boy from Area 5 coughed into my face I got him some on the hand too. He is gone, certainly. I wonder about him and where he is off too, I can hear him yet not see.

Has he lasted through the day at least I knew that? I well no in a few hours what next- if there are any more surprises, they made up fast for us to endure as they did with having wild wolf after us... and big cats. I knew I had to find a place to sleep that would be safe in an open field with a fire ring around me- that would keep everything away, no? If I am the one inside feeding the flames- I knew not for long yet I need some shut-eye. Some are in caves- yet I do not want their batshit virus. No thanks... When they hologram the dead's images into the sky for the rest of us to see, and on our bracelets...

He had no confidence he could win. And I will not end up with the unpleasant task of killing him. It is better if he is out of this for good, I do not know all I know is this is killing me too.

I got to the point where I go my gear... all the things that were my dad's or passed in the family down for this moment. There was in a lockbox that I had to crack also... just part of the tournament to them, as you have some kid breathing down your neck, wanting to kill you- I was playing with the combo.

One eye on the lock and one-off to all the other sides, I was frantic... yet the combo was my great granddad's ID number- something that was deep in my mind that I knew I had. I tried all the family members, and that one worked, there was one can of dog food too- yet I know I will eat anything... that what they gave me... to live on. Comparable to a mutt...?

I slump down next to my backpack, dog- tired- with the meet of three of them...

I will eat anything... I need to go through it anyway before night falls. See what I must work with. As I unhook the straps, I can feel it has sturdily made although an unfortunate color. This orange will practically glow in the dark. I will make a mental note to camouflage it first thing tomorrow.

I flip open the flap. What I want most, right at this moment, is water. A girl that wanted to play nice directive to immediately find water was not arbitrary- I was going to do the same play nice until they turned one another on.

I will not last long without it, and she knows the way or so I will trust. It may be a trap- yet I go for it- the thought in my mind said she okay- I will be there too.

It is a trap- I see 10 run up on me and I load the gun- popping them all off in the head, her first, stopping to reload the gun with black powder, the last one I say her eye color she was that close. Yet I got them all... the knives, that were thrown at me not all missing me, the arrows fly past, yet I dodge them as I am behind a tree.

49- I see all of them that have passed by my hands- I was happy- and rewarded for my bravery. They added metal to my uniform sent in by the unmanned drone of a bluebird square under it are pin-like thing hanging out of all that I killed off with their colors. I have 14 deaths now- that I have claimed, all the names I do not even know- nor did they know me or do anything to me for them to pass on.

The number went down more- as the update went down to 20 kids. 15 boys and 5 girls... with me included.

Now the real tournament starts to me- as the blood drips from my teeth I giggled crazily... wanting to win this no matter what! Ha- ha I can do this- as I rip the raw meat with my k-9-teeth that I shared with a fingernail fill, that I found in one of the girl's handbags, I have all these things now that I want the rest, I let behind with their naked bodies- for something to find and eat.

I killed boys- I never thought they all would be so different... and something I would not understand. Yet I had to do it! I used them... and I got them to fall for me in every way I could. It is all part of the star tournament for girls!

For a few days, I will be able to function with unpleasant symptoms of dehydration and the runs, LIKEWISE, after that I will deteriorate into helplessness and be dead in a week, tops. I carefully laid out the provisions and filmed what I could. I am down to 60 pounds. It has been three weeks now... my mind is spinning with what if. He is a week somewhere... lost he would not say... all I heard was go one and do this.

Nothing to sleep on LIKEWISE, the ground and piled up pin tree limbs.

The bottle- the water of another girl, that I am not sure about, I added bleach I found of another dead boy body 16 drops, and I can, have it? I was out at this point- run and always moving in the night- and the day resting some... if there asleep like the animals that are when I move. And pop them in the head will they dream of banging me off. I got one last night that way and it feels so-o good!

I got his tighties underwire and made a white flag out of them hanging now on a stick, for them all to see on the screen of his giving up, that was an easy kill to make... and I wanted to be a dick about it... for he did not have much of one. I would no... my boy is the man here! I hope he is all good.

I developed an awareness of the dryness in my throat and mouth, the cracks in my lips. I have been moving all day long. It has been hot, and I have sweated a lot and I know that is not good. Yet that is not stopping the boys from making their way at me... I can fight all of them all- I thought, or can I?

As I refill my pack- I have an awful thought. The lake, I have made it there- over high wood rope passageways and train, replying down the sides of rock faces, I did it all, The Kamahi Lake is a full day's journey from where I sit now, a much harder journey with nothing to drink for you can drink this with all that is in it. And then, even if I reach it, it is sure to be heavily guarded by some of the Career stars.

I am about to panic when I remember the rabbit I got earlier today. It must drink, too, or I must eat it without- cocking. I just must find out where- he is... that is all I can think about at this point is him.

4 weeks now- Dusk is closing in and I am ill at ease. The trees are too thin to offer much camouflage. The layer of pine needles that muffles my footsteps also makes tracking animals harder when I need their trails to find water. And I am still heading downhill, deeper, and deeper into a valley that seems endless, my dress looks like Swiss cheese at this point all dirty and such, no underwear at this point it was used as cordage. Like my shoestrings...

I am hungry, too, LIKEWISE, I do not dare break into my precious store of crackers and beef yet. Instead, I take my knife and go to work on a pine tree, cutting away the outer bark and scraping off a large handful of the softer inner bark. I slowly chew the stuff as I walk along. After a week of the finest food in the world, it is a little hard to choke down. Then I have eaten plenty of pine in my life. I will adjust quickly and do not think about it.

In another hour, it is clear I must find a place to camp yet again. Night creatures are coming out and up inside my girly-ness gross. I can hear the infrequent hoot or howl; my first clue is that I will be competing with natural predators for rabbits. As to whether I will be viewed as a source of food, it is too soon to tell. There could be any number of animals pestering me at this instant.

Nonetheless, right now, I decided to make my fellow stars a priority. I am sure many will continue hunting through the night.

Those who fought it out at the lavishness will have food, an abundance of water from the lake, torches or flashlights, and weapons they are itching to use. I can only hope I have travelled far and fast enough to be out of choice.

Before settling down, I take my wire and set two twitch-up snares in the brush. I know it is risky to be setting traps, LIKEWISE, food will go so fast out here. And I cannot set snares on the run. Still, I walk another five minutes before making camp.

I pick my tree carefully, a willow, not tall LIKEWISE, set in a clump of other willows, and camouflage in those long, flowing tresses. I hiked up, sticking to the stronger branches close to the trunk, and found a sturdy fork for my bed. It takes some doing, then again, I arrange the sleeping bag in a comfortable manner. I found the bag of one of the girls I killed number 2 on my line up.

I am small enough to tuck the top of the bag over my head, LIKEWISE, I put on my hood as well. As night falls, the air cools quickly. In the face of the risk, I took in

getting the backpack, I know now it was the right choice. It is all about choosing what do you pick. What would you like me to do?

I place my backpack at the foot of the bag, then slide in after it. As a precaution, I remove my belt, loop it around the division and my sleeping bag, and refasten it at my waist. Now if I roll over in my sleep, I will not go crashing to the earth.

Nightfall has just come when I hear the anthem that precedes the death summary. Through the branches, I can see the seal of the Bureau, which is floating in the atmosphere.

I am viewing another screen, an enormous one that is transported by one of their disappearing hovercrafts.

This sleeping bag, radiating back and preserving my body heat, will be energetic.

I am sure there are several other stars whose major anxiety right now is how to stay warm whereas I may be able to get a few hours of sleep.

If only I was not so desired of all that is life.

The anthem fades out and the sky goes dark for a moment. At home, we would be watching full coverage of every killing, LIKEWISE, that is thought to give a one-sided gain to the living others.

LIKEWISE, now instead of scores, they post only Borough numbers. I take a deep breath as the face of the all-dead kids begin and tick them off one by one on my fingers.

For the occasion, if I got my hands on the bow and shot someone, my secret would be revealed to all. No, here in the arena, all we see is the same snapshot they showed when they televised our training scores. Simple headshots. Yet this time with a star saying they have fallen.

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The first to see is the girl from Borough 2. That means that the career stars from 1 and 2 have all endured. No astonishment there. Then the boy from 3, I did not presume that one, usually all the vacations make it through the first day. The boy from Borough-

3. I guess-

The scary-faced girl made it. Both try LIKEWISE, between 4 and 7. The boy from 8. From 10. Yes, there is the boy who I fought for the backpack. I have run through my fingers, only one deader try LIKEWISE, to go. Is it him? No, there is the girl from borough 12. That is, it, the Bureau closure is back with a final musical exaggeration. Then obscurity and the sounds of the timberland pick up where it left off.

I am thankful my man is still flourishing and not dead or messed up in the head. I tell myself again that if I get killed, his winning will be a big advantage to his mother the most, for he is a lot like me. This is what I tell myself to clarify the self-

contradictory sentiments, which ascend when I think of him all the time. When I not with him I touch myself like I want him to touch me. I think of you...

The gratitude that he gave me an edge by professing his love for me in the interview. The dread that we may come face-to-face at any moment in this arena. I know what I may have to do... Yet I will not and never will him even if we hear them say someone KILL- KILL- KILL.

5 not dead, LIKEWISE, none from Area 14. I try to work out who is left. A bonnie boy made it through the first day. I cannot help feeling glad. That makes ten of us. The other three I will figure out tomorrow. Now when it is dark, and I have traveled far, and I am nestled high in this tree, now I must try and rest. I know this is good enough for now.

I have not slept in four days, and then there was a long day's voyage into the arena. Gradually, I allow my muscles to reduce. My eyes close... The last thing I think is it is fortunate I do not snore or at least he never said that I did. I was on top of him in the tree, all snuggled.

Spur-of-the-moment! The sound of a breaking branch wakes me yet not him. I shake him up- how long have I been asleep? Four hours? Five- nine hours- too long? Yet we had lots of covers up there 500 feet in the air.

The tip of my nose is icy cold- yet I kiss him, and kip rubs my nose- and the heat of our body is keeping the child down. Break! Snap! This is not the sound of a branch under our feet, LIKEWISE, the sharp crack of one coming from a tree. Crack!

Snap! I judge it to be several hundred yards to my right. Leisurely, without a sound, I turn myself on that route. For a few minutes, there is nothing LIKEWISE, darkness and some come to blows. Then I see a flash and a small fire begins to bloom. A pair of hands warm over flames, LIKEWISE, I cannot make out more than that yet- moving fast like.

I must bite my lip not to scream every foul name, and I know at the fire maze. What are they thinking? He asked me to hold me in his arms as we got off and he leaned in for the kiss and I met that the rest of the way?

A fire in all just at nightfall would have been one thing. Those who battled at the profusion, with their superior strength and surplus of supplies, could not have been near enough to spot the flames then. Likewise, then now, when they have certainly been searching the forests for hours looking for wounded or dead- the wounded are left to pass on their no help for the week. You might as well be waving a flag and shouting, ‘Come and get me!’ And here I am a stone’s throw from the biggest idiot in the Tournament. Strapped in a tree. Not daring to flee since my general location has just been broadcast to any killer who cares. I mean, I know it is cold out here and not everybody has a sleeping bag. Likewise, then again you grit your teeth and stick it out until dawn!

I lay smoldering in my bag with his naked body on top of mine, I feel his skin so smooth- for the next couple of hours thinking that if I can get off- enough even if death is nearing us both- and just one, my nature has been to flee, not fight with him caring me out of harm. A boy that is fighting for me is what I have always dreamed about more than marriage even. I have dreamed about that too what young girl has not- it the most important day in a girl’s life- no? I could see me with him- at the end of this now.

However, this person's a hazard. Ill-advised people are dangerous. Then this one undoubtedly does not have much in the way of guns while I have this excellent knife.

The atmosphere is still dim yet sparkly with the stars overhead all twilight, LIKEWISE, I can feel the first signs of dawn approaching. I am an establishment to think us- meaning the individual whose death I am now developing and me- we might have gone unnoticed. Then I heard it. numerous pairs of feet breaking into a run. The fire starter must have dozed off. They are on her formerly she can escape from. I know it is a girl now, I can tell by the pleading, the agonized scream that follows. Then there's laughter and compliments from several voices. Someone cries out, '13- or 12 down and 11 to go no!' Yet they are so far away from us know it may be weeks where it- will just be he and I- I wonder if I will get pregnant?

I might- with all this that we are doing, I know nothing about that yet I sure I could do that, they would still not take me out of the fight, and they would still kill him off to... so he must pull out- and have it gone on my cheeks. Would you squeeze and suck my breast right here (she pointed to where she wanted him to kiss and draw in with lips.) I asked in a moment looking up at the skies.

The sighs- she cried- saying I do not want to ever leave you- wrapped around his was- still locked into him- and his love and Mr. Winky- that is what I call those thingies. He was kissing my neck- and I was him- I think- I got a hicky somewhere on my collarbone it is black and blue. And a chapped hood- from kissing it- It is love- and they are not stopping it- NEVER- EVER! The videos we have would kick your tongue

out tongue. And yes- you can see me doing that too- hold it out and show that before the goopy was gulped hard.

After all the sex- he-a being- the sweet boy- that he is LIKEWISE, a tampon in me. The string hanging there looked at me- saying- if I when this I want you- if you when this would you say the same- YES! We cleaned off in the river in the moonlight- a naked swim- where the eyes were looking for you did not get to us. We run more than the others... about 10 miles. I do not feel all the cute looking like I do muddy and showing hair everywhere yet- love is love and you just do not care if it is.

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‘Why not...? You saved me with those bugs. You are smart enough to still be alive. And I cannot seem to shake you anyway,’ I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide. ‘You hungry?’ I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the meat. ‘Come on then, I’ve had two kills today.’ Permitted tentatively steps out into the open. ‘I can fix your stings.’ ‘Can you?’ I ask. ‘How?’ She digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I am almost certain they are the ones my mother uses. ‘Where’d you find those?’

‘Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there,’ says Leah. ‘There is a lot here, too.’

‘That is right. Are you part of 11? Cultivation,’ I say. ‘Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you have wings.’ Permitted smiles. I have landed on one of the few things she will admit pride in. ‘Well, come on, then. Fix me up.’

I noticed a long burn on Leah's forearm. 'I've got something for that.' I set aside my weapons and anoint her arm with the burning medicine; she stuffs another handful of leaves in her mouth, and soon I am laughing because the release is so sweet.

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, Permitted places the handful of leaves into her mouth and began to chew them. My mother would use other methods, LIKEWISE, it is not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Permitted presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

'Oh.' The sound comes out of my mouth before, I can stop it. It is as if the leaves are leaching the pain right out of the sting. Permitted giggles. 'Lucky you had the sense to pull the stingers out or you'd be a lot worse.' 'Do my neck...! Do my cheek...!' I almost begging... 'You have good sponsors,' she says longingly. 'Have you gotten anything yet?' I ask. She shakes her head. 'You will, though. Watch. The closer we get to the end; the more people will realize how clever you are.' I turn the meat over.

'You weren't joking about wanting me for an ally?' she asks. 'No, I meant it,' I say. I can almost hear Sam- groaning as I team up with this wispy child.

Likewise, I want her. Roasted over the fire, they have the sharp sweet taste of a parsnip. She recognizes the bird, too, some wild thing they call a gosling in her Borough. She says sometimes a flock will wander into the orchard and they get a decent lunch that day. For a while, all conversation stops as we fill our stomachs. Gosling has a delicious meal that is so fatty, the grease drips down your face when you bite into it.

Because she is a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of my sister. ‘Okay,’ she says, and holds out her hand. We shake. ‘It’s a deal.’ Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, LIKEWISE, neither of us mentions that.

She added a big handful of starchy roots to the meal. Yet she so nice to me I just cannot- I can put a knife in the little sweetheart. ‘Oh,’ says she sighs heavily. ‘I’ve never had a whole leg to myself before.’

I will bet she has not. I will bet meat hardly ever comes her way. ‘Take the other,’ I say.

‘Really?’ She asks.

‘Take whatever you want. Now that I have a bow and arrows, I can get more. Plus, I have snares. I can show you how to set them,’ I say. Permitted still looks uncertainly at the leg. ‘Oh, take it,’ I say, putting the drumstick in her hands. ‘It will only last a few days anyway, and we’ve got the whole bird plus the rabbit.’ Once she has hold of it, her appetite wins out and she takes a huge mouthful. ‘I would have thought, in Borough Eleven, you would have a bit more to eat than us.

You know, since you grow the food,’ I say.

Permitted eyes widen big that one thing about her eyes is big. ‘Oh, no, we’re not allowed to eat the crops.’

‘They arrest you or something?’ I ask.

‘They whip you and make everyone else watch-’ ‘The mayor’s extremely strict about it.’

‘Don’t you have to be in school?’ I ask.

‘Not during harvest. Everyone works then,’ she says.

It is interesting, hearing about her life. We have so little communication with anyone outside our Borough. I wonder if the Tournament Producers are blocking out our conversation because even though the information seems harmless, they do not want people in different Boroughs to know about one another. The suggestion is made by her- cute- but we lay out all our food to plan. She is seen most of me, LIKEWISE, I added the last couple of crackers and beef strips to the pile. She has gathered quite a collection of roots, nuts, greens, and even some berries. I tentatively bite into one, and it is as good as our blackberries. Taking Permitted on as an ally seems a better choice all the time. We divide up our food supplies, so if we are separated, we will both be settled for a few days. Apart from the food, permitted has a small waterskin, a homemade slingshot, and an extra pair of socks. She also has a sharp shard of rock she uses as a knife.

I roll an unfamiliar berry in my fingers. ‘You sure this is safe?’ ‘Oh, yes, we have them back home. I have been eating them for days,’ she says, popping a handful in her mouth. ‘I know it’s not much,’ she says as if embarrassed, ‘LIKEWISE, I had to get away from the Copiousness fast.’

‘You did exactly right,’ I say. When I spread out my gear, she gasps a little when she sees the sunglasses.

‘How did you get those?’ she asks.

‘In my pack. They have been useless so far. They do not block the sun and they make it harder to see,’ I say with a shrug.

‘These aren’t for the sun, they’re for obscurity,’ cries Leah. ‘Sometimes, when we harvest through the night, they will pass out a few pairs to those of us highest in the trees. Where the torchlight does not reach. One time, this boy Martin tried to keep his pair. Hid it in his pants. They killed him on the spot.’

‘They killed a 4 boy for taking these?’ I speak.

‘Yes, and everyone knew he was no danger. Martin was not right in the head. I mean, he still acted like a three-year-old. He just wanted the glasses to play with,’ she said.

Hearing this makes me feel like Borough 14 is some sort of haven. Of course, people keep over from starvation all the time, LIKEWISE, I cannot imagine the peacekeepers murdering a simple-minded child. There is a little girl, one of the grandkids of my Grannie, who wanders around the mess-hall. She’s not right, LIKEWISE, she is treated as a sort of pet. People toss her scraps and things.

So, they are fighting in a pack. I am not flabbergasted. Often alliances are formed in the initial stages of the Playoffs. The strong band together to hunt down the weak then, when the tension becomes too great, begin to turn on one another. I do not have to wonder too hard who has made this alliance. It will be the remaining Career stars

from constituencies 1, 2, and 6. Two boys and three girls. The ones who lunched together.

For a moment, I heard them read the girl for supplies. I can tell by their comments they have found nonentity good. I phenomenon if the victim is Permitted LIKEWISE, quickly dismiss the thought.

She is much too bright to be building a fire like that.

‘Better clear out so they can get the body before it starts stinking.’ I am almost certain that it is the brutish boy from quarter 2. There are buzzes of assent and then, to my horror, I hear the pack heading toward me.

They do not know I am here. How could they? And I am well concealed in the clump of trees. At least while the sun stays down. Then my black sleeping bag will turn from camouflage to trouble. If they just keep moving, they will pass me and be gone in a minute.

Likewise, the Careers stop in the clearing about ten yards from my tree. They have penlights and torches. I can see an arm here, a boot there, through the breaks in the undergrowth. I turn to stone, not even daring to breathe. Have they spotted me? No, not yet. I can tell from their words their minds are elsewhere. We even had a moment where we got to dance slowly under the stars and the green leaves sawing like the wind.

‘Shouldn’t we have heard an in my mind by now the callouts- or are we off for some loving- for that is what they want to see- young love?’ ‘I would say yes... Nothing

to prevent them from going in immediately- to this- she did not know- I want the time.’ It did not take much for them to say yes...

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‘You can feed yourself. Can they?’ I ask.

‘They do not need to. They have all those supplies,’ Permitted says.

‘Say they did not. Say the supplies were gone. How long would they last?’ I speak. ‘I mean, it’s the Starvation Tournament, right?’

‘LIKEWISE, Melisa, they’re not hungry,’ says Leah.

‘No, they are not. That is the problem,’ I agree. And for the first time, I have a plan. A plan that is not motivated by the need for flight and evasion. An offensive plan. ‘I think we’re going to have to fix that, Leah.’

Permitted has decided to trust me wholeheartedly. I know this because as soon as the anthem finishes, she snuggles up against me and falls asleep. Nor do I have any misgivings about her, as I take no precautions.

If she had wanted me dead, all she would have had to do was disappear from that tree without pointing out the tracker jacker nest. Needling me, at the very back of my mind, is obvious. Both of us can win these tournaments. Likewise, since the odds are still against both of us surviving, I manage to ignore the thought.

Besides, I am distracted by my latest idea about Careers and their supplies. Somehow Permitted and I must find a way to destroy their food. I am sure feeding themselves will be a tremendous struggle. Traditionally, the Career's strategy is to get hold of all the food early on and work from there. The years when they have not protected it well- one year a pack of hideous reptiles destroyed it, another a Tournament Producers' flood washed it away- those are usually the years that other Boroughs have won.

That the Careers have been better red growing up is to their disadvantage, because they do not know how to be hungry.

Not the way Permitted, and I do.

Likewise, I am too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Permitted at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, have given me a sense of security. I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I have been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human being can be. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn. Tomorrow, it is the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of the cannon jolts me awake. The sky's streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Permitted perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, LIKEWISE, there are not any.

'Who do you think that was?' I cannot help thinking of my boy. 'I don't know.' 'It could have been any of the others,' says Leah. 'We'll know tonight.'

‘Who’s left again?’ I ask.

‘The boy from Borough One. From Two. The boy from Three. Thresh and me. And you and My boy,’ says Leah. ‘That is right. Wait, and the boy from Ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.’

There is someone else, LIKEWISE, neither of us can remember who it is.

‘I wonder how that last one died,’ says Leah.

‘No telling. Likewise, it is good for us. Death should hold the crowd for a bit. We will have time to do something before the Tournament Producers decide things have been moving too slowly,’ I say. ‘What’s in your hands?’

‘What kind are those?’ I ask.

‘Not sure. There is a marshy area along that way. Waterbird,’ she says.

It would be nice to cook them, LIKEWISE, neither of us wants to risk a fire. My guess is the one who died today was a victim of the Careers, which means they have recovered enough to be back in the Tournament. We each suck out the insides of an egg, eat a rabbit leg and some berries. It is a good breakfast anywhere.

‘Ready to do it?’ I say, pulling on my pack.

‘Do what?’ says Leah, LIKEWISE she bounces up, and you can tell she is up for whatever I propose.

‘Today we take out the Careers’ food,’ I say.

‘Really? How?’ You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she is exactly the opposite of my sister for whom adventures are an ordeal.

‘No idea. Come on, we will figure out a plan while we hunt,’ I say.

We do not get much hunting done though because I am too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of- Permitted about the Careers’ base. She has only been in to spy on them briefly, LIKEWISE, she is observant.

They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they have been leaving another, the boy from Borough 3, to watch over the supplies.

‘The boy from Borough Three?’ I ask. ‘He’s working with them?’

‘What weapons does he have?’ I ask.

‘Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, LIKEWISE, thresh could kill him easily,’ says Leah.

‘And the food’s just out in the open?’ I speak. She nods. ‘Something’s not quite right about that whole setup.’

‘I know. Likewise, I could not tell what exactly,’ says Leah. ‘Melisa, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?’

‘Burn it. Dump it in the lake. Soak it in fuel.’ I poke Permitted in the belly, just like I would my sister. ‘Eat it!’ She giggles.

‘Do not worry, I will think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.’

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I came to know Leah, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forage in the meadows in a Borough where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Leah, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, ‘Music.’ This all I have...

‘Music?’ I speak. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. ‘You have a lot of time for that?’

‘We sing at home. At work, too. That is why I love your pin,’ she says, pointing to the blue jay that I have again forgotten about.

‘You have a blue jay?’ I ask.

‘Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,’ she says.

‘What do you mean?’ I speak.

‘I am usually up highest, so I am the first to see the flag that signals to quiet time.

There is a special little song I do,’ says Leah. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. ‘And the blue jays spread it around the

orchard. That is how everyone knows to knock off,' she continues. 'They can be dangerous though if you get too near their nests. Likewise, you cannot blame them for that.'

I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. 'Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.'

'Oh, no,' says Leah, closing my fingers back over the pin. 'I like to see it on you. That is how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.' She pulls a necklace woven out of grass from her shirt. On it hangs a carved wooden star. Or it is a flower. 'It's a good luck charm.'

'Well, it's worked so far,' I say, pinning the blue jay back on my shirt. 'Maybe you should just stick with that.'

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I will help Permitted collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she will have time for on her own. We decided to meet afterward at the site where we ate our first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before I leave, I make sure Leah's well stocked with food and matches. I even insist she takes my sleeping bag; in case it is not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

'What about you? Won't you be cold?' she asks. 'Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake,' I say. 'You know, stealing isn't illegal here,' I say with a grin.

At the last minute, Permit decides to teach me her blue jay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. 'It might not work. Likewise, if you hear the blue jays singing it, you will know I am okay, only I cannot get back right away.'

'Are there many blue jays here?' I ask.

'Haven't you seen them? They have nests everywhere,' she says. I must admit I did not notice.

'Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I will see you for dinner,' I say.

Surprisingly, permitted throws her arms around me.

I only hesitated a moment before I hugged her back. 'You, too,' I say. I turn and head back to the stream, feeling somehow worried. About Permitted being killed, about Permitted not being killed and the two of us being left for last, about leaving Permitted alone, about leaving my sister alone back home. No, my sister has my mother and permission and a baker who has promised she will not go hungry. Permitted has only me.

Once- I reach the stream, I have only to follow it effortlessly to the place I initially picked it up after the bug attack. I must be cautious as I move along the water though because my thoughts are preoccupied with unanswered questions, most of which concern my body. The cannon that fired early this morning, did that signify his death? If so, how did he die? At the hand of a Career? And was that in revenge for letting me live?

More likely it would just burn itself out and then what? I would have achieved nothing and given them far too much information about myself.

That I was here, that I have an accomplice, that I can use the bow and arrow with correctness.

I struggle again to remember that moment over Glimmer's body when he burst through the trees. Likewise, just the fact that he was sparkling leads me to doubt everything that happened. Somehow, I do not think he is talking about Leah. She did not drop a nest of bugs on him.

I stayed put for half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance. I could send a flaming arrow into the triangle easily enough, I am a good enough shot to get it through those openings in the net LIKEWISE, there is no guarantee it would catch.

There is no alternative. I am going to have to get in close and see if I cannot discover what exactly protects the supplies. I am about to reveal myself when a movement catches my eye. Several hundred yards to my right, I see someone emerge from the woods. For a second, it is Leah, LIKEWISE, then I recognize- she is the one we could remember this morning creeping out onto the plane.

When she decides it is safe, she runs for the triangle, with quick, small steps. Just before she reaches the circle of supplies that have been littered around the triangle, she stops, searches the ground, and carefully places her feet on a spot.

Then she begins to approach the triangle with strange little hops, sometimes landing on one foot, teetering slightly, risking a few steps. At one point, she launches up in the air, over a small barrel, and lands poised on her tiptoes. LIKEWISE, she overshot slightly, and her momentum threw her forward. I hear her give a sharp squeal as her hands hit the ground, LIKEWISE, nothing happens. In a moment, she regained her feet and continued until she had reached the bulk of the supplies.

So, I am right about the booby trap, LIKEWISE, it is more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too. How wily is she to have discovered this path into food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin.

Likewise, only a handful from each, not enough to tip off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she is doing her odd little dance back out of the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe.

I must have been moving very slowly yesterday because I reached the shallow stretch where I took my bath in just a few hours. I stop replenishing my water and add a layer of mud to my backpack. It seems bent on reverting to orange no matter how many times I cover it.

My proximity to the Careers' camp sharpens my senses, and the closer I get to them, the more guarded I am, pausing frequently to listen for unnatural sounds, an arrow already fitted into the string of my bow. I do not see any others, LIKEWISE, I do notice

some of the things Permitted has mentioned. Patches of sweet berries. A bush with the leaves that healed my stings. Clusters of bugs nest in the vicinity of the tree I was trapped in. And here and there, the black-and-white flash of a blue jay wing in the branches high over my head.

I get a firmer grasp on my bow and go on. I make it to the police officers Permitted has told me about and again must admire her cleverness. It is right at the edge of the wood, LIKEWISE, the bushy foliage is so thick down low I can easily observe the Career camp without being spotted. Between us lies the flat expanse where the Tournament began.

When I reach the tree with the abandoned nest at the foot, I pause a moment, to gather my courage. Permitted has given specific instructions on how to reach the best spying place near the lake from this point. Remember, I tell myself. You are the hunter now, not them.

The boy from Borough 1, Permitted and the girl from Borough 2, and a scrawny, ashen-skinned boy who must be from Borough 3. He made almost no impression on me at all during our time in the Bureau. I can remember almost nothing about him, not his costume, not his training score, not his interview. Even now, as he sits there fiddling with a plastic box, he is easily ignored in the presence of his large and domineering companions.

Likewise, he must be of some value, or they would not have bothered to let him live. Still, seeing him only adds to my sense of unease over why the Careers would leave him as a guard, why they have allowed him to live at all.

Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies. They must not have had the sense to remove the stingers, or if they did, not known about the leaves that healed them. Whatever medicines they found in Copiousness have been ineffective.

The whole setup is completely perplexing. The distance, the netting, and the presence of the boy from Borough 3. One thing is for sure, destroying those supplies is not going to be as simple as it looks. Some other factor is at play here, and I had better stay put until I figure out what it is. My guess is the triangle is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart.

The possibilities are endless.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Permitted shout out. He is pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that permitted must have set the first campfire. We had made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It is loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether the boy from Borough 3 should stay or accompany them.

‘He is coming. We need him in the woods, and his job’s done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies,’ says Leah.

‘What about Lover Boy?’ says the boy from Borough 1.

‘I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It is a miracle he has not bled to death yet. At any rate, he is in no shape to raid us,’ says Leah.

So, my boy is out there in the woods, wounded badly. Likewise, I am still in the dark about what motivated him to betray the Careers.

‘Come on,’ says Leah. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from Borough 3, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing I hear as they enter the woods is Permitted saying, ‘When we find her, I kill her in my way, and no one interferes.’

I realize I am grinding my teeth in frustration. She has confirmed what I had already guessed. Likewise, what sort of trap have they laid that requires such dexterity? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so that her hands contacted the earth? You would have thought. And slowly it begins to dawn on me. You would have thought the very ground was going to explode.

‘It’s mined,’ I whisper. That explains everything. The Careers’ willingness to leave their supplies, her reaction, the involvement of the boy from Borough 3, where they have the factories, where they make televisions, automobiles, and explosives. Likewise, where did he get them? In the supplies?

That is not the sort of weapon the Tournament Producers usually provide, given that they like to see the drawn blood personally. I slip out of the bushes and cross to one of the round metal plates that lifted them into the arena. The ground around it has

been dug up and patted back down. The landmines were disabled after the sixty seconds we stood on the plates, LIKEWISE, the boy from Borough 4 must have managed to reactivate them. I have never seen anyone in the Tournament do that. I bet it came as a shock even to the Tournament Producers.

Well, hurray for the boy from-

Borough 3 for putting one over on them, LIKEWISE, what am I supposed to do now? I cannot go strolling into that mess without blowing myself sky-high. As for sending in a burning arrow, that is more laughable than ever. The mines are set off by pressure. It does not have to be a lot, either. One year, a girl dropped her token, a small wooden ball, while she was at her plate, and they had to scrape bits of her off the ground.

My arm's good, I might be able to chuck some rocks in there and set off what? One mine? That could start a chain reaction. Or could it? Would the boy from Borough 3 have placed the mines in such a way that a single mine would not disturb the others? Thereby protecting the supplies LIKEWISE, ensuring the death of the invader. Even if I only blew up one of mine, I would draw the Careers back down on me for sure. And anyway, what am I thinking? There is that net, clearly strung to deflect any such attack. Besides, what I would need is to throw about thirty rocks in there at once, setting off a big chain reaction, demolishing the whole lot.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Leah's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have begun to suspect some sort of trick.

Time is running out.

There is a solution to this, I know there is if I can only focus hard enough. I stare at the triangle, the bins, the crates, too heavy to topple over with an arrow. One contains cooking oil, and the burning arrow idea is reviving when I realize I could end up losing all twelve of my arrows and not get a direct hit on an oil bin since I would just be guessing. I am genuinely thinking of trying to re-create Fox-face's trip up to the triangle in hopes of finding a new means of destruction when my eyes light on the burlap bag of apples. I could sever the rope in one shot, didn't I do as much in the Training Center? It is a big bag, LIKEWISE, it still might only be good for one explosion. If only I could free the apples themselves.

I know what to do. I move into range and give myself three arrows to get the job done. I place my feet carefully, block out the rest of the world as I take meticulous aim, the first arrow tears through the side of the bag near the top, leaving a split in the burlap. The second widens it to a gaping hole.

I can see the first apple teetering when I let the third arrow go, catching the torn flap of burlap and ripping it from the bag.

For a moment, everything seems frozen in time. Then the apples spill to the ground and I am blown backward into the air.

The impact of the hard-packed earth of the plain knocks the wind out of me.

My backpack does little to soften the blow.

Fortunately, my quiver has caught in the crook of my elbow, sparing both itself and my shoulder, and my bow is locked in my grasp. The ground still shakes with

explosions. I cannot hear them. I cannot hear anything now. Likewise, the apples must have set off enough mines, causing debris to activate the others. I manage to shield my face with my arms as shattered bits of matter, some of it burning, raining down on me. Acrid smoke fills the air, which is not the best remedy for someone trying to regain the ability to breathe.

After about a minute, the ground stops vibrating. I roll on my side and allow myself a moment of satisfaction from the sight of the smoldering wreckage that was recently the triangle. Careers are not likely to salvage anything out of that.

I had better get out of here, I think.

They will be making a beeline for the place. Likewise, once I am on my feet, I realize escape may not be so simple. I am dizzy. Not the slightly wobbly kind, LIKEWISE, the kind that sends the trees swooping around you and causes the earth to move in waves under your feet.

I take a few steps and somehow wind up on my hands and knees. I wait a few minutes to let it pass, LIKEWISE, it does not.

Panic begins to set in. I cannot stay here. The flight is essential. Likewise, I can neither walk nor hear. I place a hand to my left ear, the one that was turned toward the blast, and it comes away bloody. Have I gone deaf from the explosion? The idea frightens me. I rely as much on my ears as my eyes as a hunter, more at times.

Likewise, I cannot let my fear show. Positively, I am living on every screen in Pane.

So-o individuals do tear out their hair and beat the ground with their fists- if I did not know that it was aimed at me, at what I have done to him. Add to that my nearness, my inability to run or defend myself, and in fact, the whole thing has made me terrified. I am glad my hiding place makes it impossible for the cameras to get a close shot of me because I am biting my nails like there is not tomorrow. Gnawing off the last bits of nail polish, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

No blood trails, I tell myself, and manage to pull my hood up over my head, tie the cord under my chin with uncooperative fingers. That should help soak up the blood. I cannot walk, LIKEWISE, can I crawl? I move forward tentatively. Yes, if I go very slowly, I can crawl. Most of the woods will offer insufficient cover. My only hope is to make it back to Leah's corpse and conceal myself in greenery. I cannot get caught out here on my hands and knees in the open. Not only will I face death, but it is also sure to be a long and painful one at Leah's hand. The thought of my sister having to watch keeps me doggedly inching my way toward the hideout.

Another blast knocks me flat on my face. A stray mine set off by some collapsing crate. This happens twice more. I am reminded of those last few kernels that burst when My sister and I popcorn over the fire at home.

To say I make it just in time is an understatement. I have just dragged myself into the tangle of hushes at the base of the trees when there's Leah, barreling onto the plain, soon followed by his companions. His rage is so extreme it might be comical.

The boy from Borough 3 throws stones into the ruins and must have declared all the mines activated because the Careers are approaching the wreckage.

Permitted has finished the first phase of his tantrum and takes out his anger on the smoking remains by kicking open various containers. The other is poking around in the mess, looking for anything to salvage, LIKEWISE, there is nothing. The boy from Borough 3 has done his job too well. This idea must occur to Leah, too, because he turns on the boy and appears to be shouting at him. The boy from Borough 3 only has time to turn and run before Permitted catches him in a headlock from behind. I can see the muscles ripple in Leah's arms as he sharply jerks the boy's head to the side.

It is that quick. The death of the boy from Borough 3.

The other two Careers are trying to calm Permitted down. I can tell he wants to return to the woods, LIKEWISE, they keep pointing at the sky, which puzzles me until I realize, of course. They think whoever set off the explosions is dead.

They do not know about arrows and apples. They assume the booby trap was faulty, LIKEWISE, that the who blew up the supplies were killed doing it. If there was a cannon shot, it could have been easily lost in the subsequent explosions. The shattered remains of the thief were removed by hovercraft. They retire to the far side of the lake to allow the Tournament Producers to retrieve the body of the boy from Borough 6. And they delay.

I suppose the cannon goes off. A hovercraft appears and takes the dead boy. The sun dips below the horizon. Night falls. Up in the sky, I see the seal and know the

anthem must have begun. A moment of darkness. They show the boy from Borough 3. They show the boy from Borough 10, who must have died this morning. Then the seal reappears. So, now they know. The bomber survived. In the seal's light, I can see Permitted and the Girl from Borough 2 put on their night-vision glasses. The boy from Borough 1 ignites a tree branch for a torch, illuminating the grim determination on all their faces. The Careers stride back into the woods to hunt.

The dizziness has subsided and while my left ear is still deafened, I can hear a ringing in my right, which seems a good sign. There is no point in leaving my hiding place, though. I am about to be as safe as I can be,

here at the crime scene. They think the bomber has a two- or three-hour lead on them. Still, it is a long time before I risk moving.

The first thing I do is dig out my glasses and put them on, which relaxes me a little, to have at least one of my hunter's senses working. I drink some water and wash the blood from my ear. Fearing the smell of meat will draw unwanted predators- fresh blood is bad enough- I make a delicious meal out of the greens and roots and berries Permitted and I gathered today.

Where is my little ally? Did she make it back to the rendezvous point? Is she worried about me? At least, the sky has shown we are both alive.

I ran through the surviving on my fingers. The boy from 1, both from 2, both from 11 and 12. Just eight of us. The betting must be getting hot in the Bureau. They will be doing specific features on each of us now. Probably interviewing our friends and

families. It has been a long time since Borough 14 made it into the top eight. And now there are two of us. Although from what Permitted said, my boy is on his way out.

Not that Permitted is the final word on anything. Didn't he just lose his entire stash of supplies?

Let the 80th Famine Tournaments begin, Leah, I think. Let them begin for real.

A cold breeze has sprung up. I reached for my sleeping bag before I remembered I left it with Leah. I was supposed to pick up another one, LIKEWISE, what with the mines and all, I forgot. I begin to shiver. Since roosting overnight in a tree is not sensible anyway, I scoop out a hollow under the bushes and cover myself with leaves and pine needles. I am still freezing. I lay my sheet of plastic over my upper body and position my backpack to block the wind. It is a little better. I begin to have more sympathy for the girl from

Borough 8 lit the fire that first night. LIKEWISE, now it is me who needs to grit my teeth and tough it out until morning. More leaves, more pine needles. I pull my arms inside my jacket and tuck my knees up to my chest. Somehow, I drift off to sleep.

When I open my eyes, the world looks slightly fractured, and it takes a minute to realize that the sun must be well up and the glasses fragmenting my vision. As I sit up and remove them, I hear a laugh somewhere near the lake and freeze. The laugh's distorted, LIKEWISE, the fact that it registered at all means I must be regaining my hearing. Yes, my right ear can hear again, although it is still ringing. As for my left ear, well, at least the bleeding has stopped.

I peer through the bushes, afraid the Careers have returned, trapping me here for an indefinite time.

No, it' she, standing in the rubble of the triangle and laughing.

She is smarter than the Careers, finding a few useful items in the ashes. A metal pot- a knife blade. I was perplexed by her amusement until I realized that with the Careers' stores eliminated, she might stand a chance. Just like the rest of us. It crosses my mind to reveal myself and enlist her as a second ally against that pack.

LIKEWISE, I rule it out.

There is something about that sly grin that makes me sure that befriending she would get me a knife in the back. With that in mind, this might be an excellent time to shoot her. Likewise, she hears something, not me, because her head turns away, toward the drop-off, and she sprints for the woods. I wait. No one, nothing shows up. Still, if she thought it was dangerous, it is time for me to get out of here, too. Besides, I am eager to tell Permitted about the triangle.

Since I've no idea where the Careers are, the route back to the stream seems as good as any. I hurry, loaded bow in one hand, a hunk of cold gosling in the other, because I am famished now, and not just for leaves and berries LIKEWISE, for the fat and protein in the meat. The trip to the stream is uneventful. Once there, I refill my water and wash, taking particular care of my injured ear.

Then- I travel uphill using the stream as a guide. At one point, I found boot prints in the mud along the bank. The Careers have been here, LIKEWISE, not for a

while. The prints are deep because they were made in soft mud, LIKEWISE, now they are dry in the hot sun. I have not been careful enough about my tracks, counting on a light tread and the pine needles to conceal my prints. Now I strip off my boots and socks and go barefoot up the bed of the stream.

The cool water has an invigorating effect on my body and my spirits. I shoot two fish, easy pickings in this slow-moving stream, and go ahead and eat one raw even though I have just had the gosling. Second, I will save Leah.

Gradually, subtly, the ringing in my right ear diminishes until it has gone entirely. I find myself pawing at my left ear periodically, trying to clean away whatever deadens its ability to collect sounds. If there is an improvement, it is undetectable. I cannot adjust to deafness in the ear. It makes me feel off-balance and defenseless to my left. Blind even. My head keeps turning to the injured side, as my right ear tries to compensate for the wall of nothingness where yesterday there was a constant flow of information. The more time that passes, the less hopeful I am that this is an injury that will heal.

When I reached the site of our first meeting, I felt certain it was undisturbed. There is no sign of Leah, not on the ground or in the trees. This is odd.

By now she should have returned, as it is midday. Undoubtedly, she spent the night in a tree somewhere. What else could she do with no light and the Careers with their night-vision glasses tramping around the woods? And the third fire she was supposed to set- although I forgot to check for it- last night- was the farthest from our site

of all. She is just being cautious about making her way back. I wish she would hurry because I do not want to hang around here too long. I want to spend the afternoon travelling to higher ground, hunting as we go. Likewise, there is nothing really for me to do LIKEWISE, wait.

I wash the blood out of my jacket and hair and clean my ever-growing list of wounds. The burns are much better-

Likewise, I use a bit of medicine on them anyway. The main thing to worry about now is keeping out the infection. I go ahead and eat the second fish. It is not going to last long in this hot sun, LIKEWISE, it should be easy enough to spear a few more for Leah. If she just shows up.

Feeling too vulnerable on the ground with my lopsided hearing, I scaled a tree to wait. If the Careers show up, this will be a fine place to shoot them from. The sun moves slowly. I do things to pass the time. Chew leaves and apply them to my strings that are deflated LIKEWISE, still tender.

Comb through my damp hair with my fingers and braid it. Lace my boots back up. Check over my bow and the remaining nine arrows. Test my left ear repeatedly for signs of life by rustling a leaf near it, LIKEWISE, without satisfactory results.

Despite the gosling and the fish, my stomach's growling, and I know I am going to have what we call a hollow day back in Borough 12. That is a day where no matter what you put in your belly; it is never enough. Having nothing to do with LIKEWISE, sitting in a tree makes it worse, so I decided to give into it. I have lost a lot

of weight in the arena; I need some extra calories. And having the bow and arrows makes me far more confident about my prospects.

I slowly peel and eat a handful of nuts. My last cracker. The gosling necks. That is good because it takes time to pick clean. Finally, a gosling wing and the bird is history. Likewise, it is a hollow day, and even with all that, I start daydreaming about food. Particularly the decadent dishes served in the Bureau. The chicken in creamy orange sauce. The cakes and pudding. Noodles in green sauce. The lamb and dried plum stew. I suck on a few mint leaves and tell myself to get over it. Mint is good because we drink mint tea after supper often, so it tricks my stomach into thinking eating time is over- sort of.

Dangling up in the tree, with the sun warming me, a mouthful of mint, my bow, and arrows at hand. This is the most relaxed I have been since I have entered the arena. If only Permitted would show up, and we could clear out. As the shadows grow, so does my restlessness. By late afternoon, I resolved to go looking for her. I can at least visit the spot where she set off the third fire and see if there are any clues to her whereabouts.

Before I go, I scatter a few mint leaves around our old campfire. Since we gathered some distance away, permitted will understand I have been here, while they will mean nothing to the Careers.

In less than an hour, I am at the place where we agreed to have the third fire and I know something has gone amiss. The wood has been artfully arranged, expertly

interspersed with tinder, LIKEWISE, it has never been lit. Permitted to set up the fire LIKEWISE, I never made it back here. Somewhere between the second column of smoke, I spied before I blew up the supplies, and at this point, she ran into trouble.

I must remind myself she is still alive. Or is she? Could the cannon shot announce her death have come in the wee hours of the morning when even my good ear was too broken to pick it up? Will she appear in the sky tonight? No, I refuse to believe it. There could be a hundred other explanations. She could have lost her way. Run into a pack of predators or another, like Thresh, and had to hide. Whatever happened, I am almost certain she is stuck out there, somewhere between the second fire and the unlit one at my feet. Something is keeping her up a tree.

I think I will go hunt it down.

It is a relief to be doing something after sitting around all afternoon. I creep silently through the shadows, letting them conceal me. LIKEWISE, nothing seems suspicious. There is no sign of any kind of struggle, no disruption of the needles on the ground. I stopped for just a moment when I heard it. I must click my head around to the side to be sure, LIKEWISE, there it is again. Leah's four-note tune coming out of a blue jay's mouth. The one that means she is all right.

I grin and move in the direction of the bird. Another just a short distance ahead notices the handful of notes. Permitted has been singing to them, and recently. Otherwise, they would have taken up some other song. My eyes lift into the trees, searching for a

sign of her. I swallow and sing softly back, hoping she will know it is safe to join me. A blue jay repeats the melody to me. And that is when I hear the scream.

It is a child's scream, a young girl's scream, there is no one in the arena capable of making that sound except for Leah. And now I am running, knowing this may be a trap, knowing the three Careers may be poised to attack me, LIKEWISE, I cannot help myself. There is another high-pitched cry, this time my name. 'Melisa! Melisa!'

'Leah!' I shouted back, so she knew I was nearby. So, they know I am near, and hopefully, the girl who has attacked them with bug and gotten an eleven they still cannot explain will be enough to pull their attention away from her. 'Leah! I am coming!'

When I break into the clearing, she is on the ground, hopelessly entangled in a net.

She just has time to reach her hand through the mesh and say my name before the spear enters her body.

The boy from Borough 1 dies before he can pull out the spear. My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his blood. I am reloaded, shifting my aim from side to side, while I shout at Leah, 'Are there more? Are there more?'

She has to say no several times before I hear it. Permitted has rolled to her side, her body curved in and around the spear. I shoved the boy away from her and pulled out my knife, freeing her from the net. One look at the wound and I know it is far beyond

my capacity to heal, beyond anyone's. The spearhead is buried up to the shaft in her stomach. I crouch before her, staring helplessly at the embedded weapon. There is no point in comforting words, in telling her she will be all right. She is no fool. Her hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline. As if it is me who is dying instead of Leah.

'You blew up the food?' she whispers.

'Every last bit,' I say.

'You have to win,' she says.

'I am going to. Going to win for both of us now,' I promise. I hear a cannon and lookup. It must be for the boy from Borough

1.

I hear the callouts- getting more gleesome- I do not want this for her- one boy was cut into 2 and hung my- a- oh- e- his head in a tree. One hand half his face blows off yet is still going... and a girl killed herself by sticking a long knife in her LIKEWISE, hole and going up in the front, she bloods out- slowly.

She was F-ed by a man she was not ever wanting to be with- she contracted his diseases, so she ended it. This tournament is too dirty for protection. I have the window to show you it was hardcore- from the backside- I would never hit it that hard. (See this... he holds up his hand and the hologram play- of them doing this for 3 mins.) 'I said she is dead! Looking over his shoulder.' I lay back down- and we started rolling around- I did

want this to be known- yet it was- she has her off- by my call. So, they can get to see what they want to see- young love- in the making and make it.

‘Love it die in the arms of the one you care about!’

(One month passes)

The love is over, and they said we must part- so we did- it was not good for him- not back for that is what they wanted to see I get a glimpse of him, lit by a torch, his garth, heading back to the girl by the fire- he was hanging with her- not love LIKEWISE, for food. He needs me to take care of him- and I have been here for three weeks now.

His face is swollen with a black eye, there is a bloody bandage on one arm and his adulthood tested in ways you would not get, and from the sound of his gait, he is limping for he has gashes. (He is my Bitch at this point.)

All right, I can stomach that seeing him in just underwire. Seeing all those supplies was tempting. LIKEWISE, this other thing. No one from area 14 would think of doing such a thing! As me helping him live- they all want death- yet not all the younger girls get it- the man does not. Career others are overly vicious, arrogant, better fed, LIKEWISE, only because they are the Bureau’s yes man.

Generally, solidly hated by all LIKEWISE, those from their Boroughs. I can imagine the things they are saying about him back home now. And my man had the nerve to talk to me about humiliation?

Noticeably, the noble boy on the rooftop was playing just one more tournament with me. Likewise, this will be his last. I will eagerly watch the night skies for signs of his death if I do not kill him first myself. The Career stars are soundless until he gets out of earshot, then uses muted voices. ‘Why- don’t we just assassinate him now and get it over with?’ A pack of girls said- it was the girl’s agent’s boys at this point. They did not like that they were still hooking- up ‘Let him tag along would be dead at the edge of a knife. So, killing them off would be the best- what is the harm- for doing it all? And he is handy with that knife.’ Is he- no cut? That is news- some girls loved it. What a lot of interesting things I am learning about my man today, when I unwrapped his bandages- this is what that girl did to you?

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My bow! My arrows! Just the sight of them makes me so angry I want to scream at myself, at that traitor my boy for distracting me from having them. I try to make eye contact with him now, LIKEWISE, he is intentionally avoiding my gaze as he polishes his knife with the edge of his shirt.

‘No,’ says Leah, pushing away the bow. ‘I’ll do better with my sword.’ I can see the weapon, a short, heavy blade on his belt.

I give Permitted time to hoist himself into the tree before I begin to climb again. Gale always says I remind him of a squirrel the way I can scurry up even the slenderest limb. Part of it is my weight, LIKEWISE, part of its practice. I am another thirty feet in the air when I hear the crack and look down to see Permitted flailing as he

and a branch go down. He hits the ground hard, and I am hoping he breaks his neck when he gets back to his feet, swearing like a friend. You must know where to place your hands and feet.

The girl with the arrows, Glimmer I hear someone call her- ugh, the names the people in Borough 1 give their children are so ridiculous- anyway twinkle scales, the tree until the branches begin to crack under her feet and then has the good sense to stop. I am at least eighty-seven high now. She tries to shoot me, and it is immediately evident that she is incompetent with a bow. One of the arrows gets lodged in the tree near me though and I can seize it. I wave it teasingly above her head as if this were the sole purpose of retrieving it when I mean to use it if I ever get the chance. I could kill them, every one of them if those silver weapons were in my hands.

The Careers regroup on the ground, and I can hear them growling conspiratorially among themselves, furious I have made them look foolish. Likewise, twilight has arrived and their window of an attack on me is closing. Finally, I hear my boy say harshly, ‘Oh, let her stay up there. It is not like she is going anywhere. We will deal with her in the morning.’

Well, he is right about one thing. I am going nowhere. All the relief from the pool water has gone, leaving me to feel the full potency of my burns. I scoot down a fork in the tree and clumsily prepare for bed. I put on my jacket and laid out my sleeping bag. Belt me in and try to keep from moaning. The heat of the bag’s too much for my leg. I cut a slash in the fabric and hung my calf out in the open air. I drizzle water on the wound, my hands, and do what I need to sleep.

All my bravado is gone. I am weak from pain and Hunger LIKEWISE; I cannot bring myself to eat. Even if I can last the night, what will the morning bring?

I stare into the foliage trying to well- myself to rest, LIKEWISE, the burns forbid it. Birds are settling down for the night, singing lullabies to their young.

Night creatures emerge. An owl hoots. The faint scent of a skunk cuts through the smoke.

The eyes of some animal peer at me from the neighboring tree- a possum maybe- catching the firelight from the Careers' torches. Suddenly, I am up on one elbow. Those are no possum's eyes; I know their glassy reflection too well. Those are not animal eyes at all. In the last dim rays of light, I make her out, watching me silently from between the branches. Leah... they killed her...

How long has she been here? The whole time. Still and unobserved as the action unfolded beneath her. She headed up her tree shortly before I did, hearing the pack was so close.

For a while, we held each other's stare. Then, without even rustling a leaf, her little hand slides into the open and points to something above my head. Low was our way of thinking about the day- I wanted to make him happy so I sucked him off as he did me. I love it is not like it was where get sick of one another at this point yet the caring and need is there, he is my love. I need to make him happy- and me doing this is one way, and him sucking my clit, and licking my come up is doing the same for me now. The

genital pulling and flicking on it just makes all the other shit go away, as I wiggle with his tackles.

Rondha- 'She might have. It seemed simple-minded to me. Every time I think about her spinning around in that dress, I want to vomit.' 'Wish we knew how she got that eleven.' 'Bet you Lover Boy knows what I did.' The sound of him returning silences them. I said- Would you stop flapping that thing is all blue and silicone- it what she uses in the night, she brought it along it was in the whole time- now it a weapon in my face, ow-e-aha!

I hope she washed it!! Why is she having one and I never did? Hum?

Moving on- The Career pack sets off at a run just as dawn begins to break, and birdsong fills the air. I remain in my awkward position, muscles trembling with exertion for a while longer, then hoist myself back onto my branch.

I need to get down, to get going, LIKEWISE, for a moment I lie there, digesting what I have heard. Not only is my boy with the Careers, but he is also helping them find me. The simple-minded girl who must be taken seriously because of her eleven.

Because she can use a bow and arrow. Which my boy knows better than anyone.

Likewise, he has not told them yet. Is he saving that information because he knows it is all that keeps him alive? Is he still pretending to love me for the audience? What is going on in his head I can hear this... and it makes me giggle...

Suddenly, the birds fall silent. Then one gives a high-pitched warning call. A single note. Just like the one Ja Permitted and I heard when the blond-headed girl was caught. High above the dying campfire, a

hovercraft materializes. A set of huge metal teeth drops down.

Slowly, gently, the dead girl that is my dad's friend's daughter is lifted into the hovercraft back out of the fight for she had the money no- to move else were. Then it vanishes. The birds resume their song.

'Move,' I whisper to myself. I wriggle out of my sleeping bag, roll it up, and place it in the pack. I take a deep breath. While I have been concealed by twilight, and the sleeping bag and the willow branches, it has been difficult for the cameras to get a good shot of me. I know they must be tracking me now though. The minute I hit the ground; I am guaranteed a close-up.

The audience will have been beside themselves, knowing I was in the tree, that I overheard the Careers talking, that I discovered my boy was with them. Until I work out exactly how I want to play that, I would better at least act on top of things.

Not puzzled... Certainly not mixed up or frightened. No, I need to look one step ahead of the tournament. So, as I slide out of the foliage and into the dawn light, I pause a second, giving the cameras time to lock on me. Then I 'cock' my head slightly- as I do with, I suck him off down there- all flirty- looking up with roll blue- cute wet eyes, to the side and give a knowing smile.

I am about to take off when I think of my snares. It is imprudent to check them with others so close. Likewise, must. Too many years of hunting, I guess. And the lure of meathead's rewarded with one fine rabbit. In no time, I have cleaned and gutted the animal, leaving the head, feet, tail, skin, and innards, under a pile of leaves. I am wishing for a fire-eating raw rabbit that can give you rabbit fever, a lesson I learned the hard way- when I think of the dead LIKEWISE. I hurried back to her camp. Sure enough, the coals of her dying fire are still hot. I cut up the rabbit, fashioned a spit out of branches, and set it over the coals.

I am glad for the cameras now. I want sponsors to see I can hunt, that I am a good bet because I will not be lured into traps as easily as the others will by Starvation. While the rabbit cooks, I grind up part of a charred branch and set about camouflaging my orange pack. The black tones it down, LIKEWISE, I feel a layer of mud would help. Of course, to have mud, I would need water.

I pull on my gear, grab my spit, kick some dirt over the coals, and take off in the opposite direction the Careers went. I eat half the rabbit as I go, then wrap up the leftovers in my plastic for later. The meat stops the grumbling in my stomach LIKEWISE, do little to quench my thirst.

Water is my top priority now.

As I hike along, I feel certain I am still holding the screen in the Bureau, so I am careful to continue to hide my emotions. Likewise, what an enjoyable time Claudius Temple-Smith must be having with his guest commentators, dissecting my boy's

conduct, my reaction. What to make of it all? Has my boy revealed his Permitted colors? How does this affect the betting odds? Will we lose sponsors? Do we even have sponsors? Of course, I feel certain we do, or at least did.

Certainly, my boy has thrown a wrench into our star-crossed lover dynamic.

Or has he- he did all I asked... and it was good- maybe since he has not spoken much about me, we can still get some mileage out of it. Individuals will think it is something we plotted together if I seem to like it amuses me now.

My eyes follow the line of her finger up into the greenery above me. At the earliest, I have no idea what she is pointing to, LIKEWISE, then, about 20 feet up there, I make out the vague shape in the dimming light. Some sort of animal? It appears around the size of a raccoon, LIKEWISE, it hangs from the bottom of a branch, swaying ever so slightly. There is something else. Among the familiar evening sounds of the woods, my ears register a low hum. Then I know.

It is a wasp nest.

Fear shoots through me, LIKEWISE, I have enough sense to keep still. I do not know what kind of wasp lives there. It could be the ordinary leave-us-alone-and we will-leave you alone type.

Likewise, these are the Star Tournament, and ordinary is not the norm. More likely they will be one of the Bureau's mutations, tracker jacker's. Like the jabber-jays, these killer wasps were spawned in a lab and strategically placed, like land mines, around the Boroughs during the war. Larger than regular wasps, they have a distinctive solid

gold body and a sting that raises a lump the size of a plum on contact. Most people cannot tolerate more than a few stings. Some die at once. If you live, the hallucinations brought on by the venom have driven people to madness. And there is another thing, these wasps will hunt down anyone who disturbs their nest and attempt to kill them. That is where the tracker part of the name comes from.

After the war, the Bureau destroyed all the nests surrounding their city, LIKEWISE, the ones near the Boroughs were left untouched. Another reminder of our weakness, I suppose, just like the Starvation Tournament. Another reason to keep inside the fence of Borough 12. When Gale and I come across a tracker jacket nest, we immediately head in the opposite direction.

So, is that what hangs above me? I look back to Permitted for help, LIKEWISE, she melted into her tree.

Given my circumstances, I guess it does not matter what type of wasp nest it is. I am wounded and trapped. Darkness has given me a brief reprieve, LIKEWISE, by the time the sun rises, the Careers will have formulated a plan to kill me. There is no way they could do otherwise after I have made them look so stupid. That nest may be the sole option I have left. If I can drop it down on them, I may be able to escape. Likewise, I will risk my life in the process.

Of course, I will never be able to get in close enough to the actual nest to cut it free. I will have to saw off the branch at the trunk and send the whole thing down. The serrated portion of my knife should be able to manage that. Likewise, can my hands? And

will the vibration from the sawing raise the swarm? And what if the Careers figure out what I am doing and move their camp? That would defeat the whole purpose.

I realize that the best chance I will have to do the sewing without drawing notice will be during the anthem. That could begin at any time. I drag myself out of my bag, make sure my knife is secured in my belt, and begin to make my way up the tree. This is dangerous since the branches are becoming precariously thin even for me, LIKEWISE, I persevere. When I reach the limb that supports the nest, the humming becomes more distinctive. Likewise, it is still oddly subdued if these are mosquitos. It is smoke, I think. It has sedated them. This was the one defense the rebels battled the wasps.

The seal of the Bureau shines above me and the anthem blares out. It is now or never, I think, and I begin to sew. Blisters burst on my right hand as I awkwardly drag the knife back and forth. Once I have a groove, the work requires less effort LIKEWISE, it is more than I can handle. I grit my teeth and saw away occasionally glancing at the sky to register that there were no deaths today. That is all right. The audience will be seated seeing me injured and treated and the pack below me. Likewise, the anthem's running out and I am only three-quarters of the way through the wood when the music ends, the sky goes dark, and I am forced to stop.

Now what? I could finish off the job with a sense of feeling LIKEWISE, which may not be the smartest plan. If the wasps are too groggy, if the nest catches on its way down, if I try to escape, this could all be a deadly waste of time. Better, I think, to sneak up here at dawn and send the nest into my enemies.

In the faint light of the Careers' torches, I inch back down to my fork to find the best surprise I have ever had. Sitting on my sleeping bag is a small plastic pot attached to a silver parachute. My first gift from a sponsor! Sam- must have had it sent in during the anthem. The pot easily fits in the palm of my hand. What can it be? Not food surely. I unscrewed the lid, and I knew from the scent that it was medicine. Cautiously, I probe the surface of the ointment. The throbbing in my fingertip vanishes.

'Oh, Sam-, ' I whisper. 'Thank you.'

He has not abandoned me. Not leaving me to fend entirely for myself. The cost of this medicine must be astronomical. Not one **LIKEWISE**, many sponsors have contrived **LIKEWISE**, to buy this one tiny spot.

To me, it is priceless.

I dip two fingers in the jar and gently spread the balm over my calf. The effect is almost magical, erasing the pain on contact, leaving a pleasant cooling sensation behind. This is no herbal concoction that my mother grinds up out of woodland plants, its high-tech medicine brewed up in the Bureau's labs. When my calf is treated, I rub a thin layer into my hands. After wrapping the pot in the parachute, I nestled it safely away in my pack. Now that the pain has eased, it is all I can do to reposition myself in my bag before I plunge into sleep.

A bird perched just a few feet from me alerts me that a new day is dawning. In the gray morning light, I examine my hands. The medicine has transformed all the angry red patches into a soft baby-skin pink. My leg still feels inflamed, **LIKEWISE**, that burn

was far deeper. I apply another coat of medicine and quietly pack up my gear. Whatever happens, I am going to have to move and move fast. I also make myself eat a cracker and a strip of beef and drink a few cups of water.

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Chats- on the fly cam- And that is when I get my first clue to his whereabouts. He could not have survived without water. I know that from my first few days here. He must be hidden somewhere near a source. There is the lake, LIKEWISE, I find that an unlikely option since it is so close to the Careers' base camp. A few spring-fed pools. Likewise, you would be a sitting duck at one of those. And the stream. The one that leads from the camp Permitted and I made it down near the lake and beyond. If he stuck to the stream, he could change his location and always be near water. He could walk in the current and erase any tracks. He might even be able to catch a fish or two.

Well, it is a place to start, anyway. To confuse my enemies' minds, I start a fire with plenty of greenwood. Even if they think it is a ruse, I hope they will decide I am hidden somewhere near it. While I am tracking my boy.

The sun burns off the morning haze almost immediately and I can tell the day will be hotter than usual. The waters cool and pleasant on my bare feet as I head downstream. I am tempted to call out my boy's name as I go LIKEWISE and decide against it. I will have to find him with my eyes and with one good ear or he will have to find me. Likewise, he will know I will be looking, right? He will not have so low of an opinion of me as to think I would ignore the new rule and keep to me. Would he? He is

extremely hard to predict, which might be interesting under different circumstances, LIKEWISE, now only provides an extra obstacle.

Escape the stream now. Fighting off Permitted or Thresh as I climbed over this rocky terrain. I have about decided I am on the wrong track entirely, that a wounded boy would be unable to navigate getting to and from this water source when I see the bloody streak going down the curve of a boulder. It is long dried now, LIKEWISE, the smeary lines running side to side suggest someone- who was not fully in control of his mental faculties- tried to wipe it away.

Hugging the rocks, I move slowly in the direction of the blood, searching for him.

I find a few more bloodstains, one with a few threads of fabric glued to it, LIKEWISE, no sign of life. I break down and say his name in a hushed voice. 'My boy! My boy!' Then a blue jay lands on a scruffy tree and begins to mimic my tones so I stop. I give up and climb back down to the stream thinking, He must have moved on.

Somewhere farther down.

My foot had just broken the surface of the water when I heard a voice.

'You here to finish me off, sweetheart?'

I whip around. It comes from the left, so I cannot pick it up very well. And the voice was hoarse and weak. Still, it must have been my boy. Who else in the arena would

call me sweetheart? My eyes peruse the bank, LIKEWISE, there is nothing. Just mud, the plants, the base of the rocks.

‘My boy?’ I whisper. ‘Where are you?’ There is no answer. Could I just have imagined it? No, I am certain it was real and nearby, too. ‘My boy?’ I creep along the bank.

‘Well, don’t step on me.’

I jumped back. His voice was right under my feet. Still, there is nothing. Then his eyes open, unmistakably blue in the brown mud and green leaves. I gasp and am rewarded with a hint of white teeth as he laughs.

It is the final word in camouflage. Forget chucking weights around. My boy should have gone into his private session with the Tournament Producers and painted himself into a tree. Or a boulder. Or a muddy bank full of weeds.

‘Close your eyes again,’ I order. He does, and his mouth too, and completely disappears. Most of what I judge to be his body is under a layer of mud and plants. His face and arms are so artfully disguised as to be invisible. I kneeled beside him. ‘I guess all those hours decorating cakes paid off.’

My boy smiles. ‘Yes, frosting. The final defense of the dying.’

‘You’re not going to die,’ I tell him firmly. ‘Says who?’ His voice is so ragged. ‘Tells me. We are on the same team now, you know,’ I told him.

His eyes open. ‘So, I heard. Nice to find what is left of me.’

I pulled out my water bottle and gave him a drink. ‘Did Permit cut you?’ I ask.

‘Left leg. Up high,’ he answers.

‘Let us get you in the stream, wash you off so I can see what kind of wounds you’ve got,’ I say.

‘Lean down a minute first,’ he says. ‘Need to tell you something.’ I lean over and put my good ear to his lips, which tickle as he whispers. ‘Remember, we’re madly in love, so it’s all right to kiss me anytime you feel like it.’

I jerk my head back LIKEWISE, end up laughing.

‘Thanks, I’ll keep it in mind.’ At least, he is still able to joke around. Likewise, when I start to help him to the stream, all the levity disappears. It is only two feet away; how hard can it be? It was extremely hard when I realized he was unable to move an inch on his own. He is so weak that the best he can do is not to resist. I try to drag him, LIKEWISE, even though I know he is doing all he can to keep quiet, sharp cries of pain escaped him. The mud and plants seem to have imprisoned him and I finally must give him a gigantic tug to break him from their clutches. He is still two feet from the water, lying there, teeth gritted, tears cutting trails in the dirt on his face.

‘Look, my boy, I am going to roll you into the stream. It is very shallow here, okay?’ I speak.

‘Excellent,’ he says.

I crouch down beside him. No matter what happens, I tell myself, do not stop until he is in the water. ‘On three,’ I say. ‘One, two, three!’ I can only manage one full roll before I must stop because of the horrible sound he is making. Now he is on the edge of the stream. This is better anyway.

‘Okay, change of plans. I am not going to put you all the way in,’ I tell him. Besides, if I get him in, who knows if I have ever been able to get him out?

‘No more rolling?’ He asks.

‘That is all done. Let us get you cleaned up. Keep an eye on the woods for me, okay?’ I speak. It is hard to know where to start. He is so caked with mud and matted leaves; I cannot even see his clothes. If he is wearing clothes. The thought makes me hesitate a moment, LIKEWISE, then I plunge in. Naked bodies are no big deal in the arena, right?

I have two water bottles and Leah’s water skin. I prop them against rocks in the stream so that two are always filling while I pour the third over My boy’s body. It takes a while, LIKEWISE, I finally get rid of enough mud to find his clothes. I gently unzip his jacket, and his shirt and ease them off him. His undershirt is so plastered into his wounds I must cut it away with my knife and drench him again to work it loose. He is badly bruised with a long burn across his chest and a four-tracker jacket stings if you count the one under his ear. Likewise, I feel a bit better. This much I can fix. I decided to take care of his upper body first, to alleviate some pain before I tackle whatever damage Permitted did to his leg.

Since treating his wounds seems pointless when he is lying in what has become a mud puddle, I manage to prop him up against a boulder. He sits there, uncomplaining, while I wash away all the traces of dirt from his hair and skin. His flesh is very pale in the sunlight, and he no longer looks strong and stocky. I must dig the stingers out of his tracker jacket lumps, which causes him to wince, LIKEWISE, the minute I apply the leaves he sighs in relief. While he dries in the sun, I wash his filthy shirt and jacket and spread them over boulders.

Then I applied the burn cream to his chest. This is when I notice how hot his skin is becoming. The layer of mud and the bottles of water have disguised the fact that he is burning with fever. I dig through the first-aid kit I got from the boy from Borough 1 and find pills that reduce your temperature. My mother breaks down and buys these on occasion when her home remedies fail.

‘Swallow these,’ I tell him, and he obediently takes the medicine. ‘You must be hungry.’

‘Not really. It is funny, I have not been hungry for days,’ says My boy. When I offer him gosling, he wrinkles his nose at it and turns away. That is when I know how sick he is.

‘My boy, we need to get some food in you,’ I insist.

‘It’ll just come right back up,’ he says. The best I can do is to get him to eat a few bits of dried apple. ‘Thanks. I am much better. Can I sleep now, Melisa?’ He asks.

‘Soon,’ I promise. ‘I need to look at your leg first.’ Trying to be as gentle as I can, I remove his boots, his socks, and then very slowly inch his pants off him. I can see the tear Leah’s sword made in the fabric over his thigh, LIKEWISE, it in no way prepares me for what lies underneath. The deep inflamed gash oozing both blood and pus. The swelling of the leg. And worst of all, the smell of festering flesh.

I want to run away. Disappear into the woods like I did that day they brought the burn victim to our house. Go and hunt while my mother and My sister attend to what I have neither the skill nor the courage to face. Likewise, there is no one here LIKEWISE, me. I try to capture the calm demeanor my mother assumes when handling particularly bad cases.

‘Pretty awful, huh?’ Says my boy.

He is watching me closely.

‘So-so.’ I shrug like it is no big deal. ‘You should see some of the people they bring my mother from the mines.’ I refrain from saying how I usually clear out of the house whenever she is treating anything worse than a cold. Come to think of it, I do not even much like to be around coughing. ‘The first thing is to clean it well.’

I have left on My boy’s undershorts because they are not in bad shape and I do not want to pull them over the swollen thigh and, all right, the idea of him being bad makes me uncomfortable. That is another thing about my mother and my sister. Nakedness does not affect them, gives them no cause for embarrassment.

Ironically, at this point in the Tournament, my little sister would be of far more use to my boy than I am. I scoot my square of plastic under him, so I can wash down the rest of him. With each bottle I pour over him, the worse the wound looks. The rest of his lower body has fared well, just one sting and a few small burns that I treat quickly. Likewise, the gash on his leg. What can I do about that?

‘Why don’t we give it some air and then.’ I trail off. ‘And then you’ll patch it up?’ says my boy. He looks almost sorry for me as if he knows how lost I am.

‘That’s right,’ I say. ‘In the meantime, you eat these.’ I put a few dried pear halves in his hand and went back into the stream to wash the rest of his clothes. When they are flattened out and drying, I examine the contents of the first-aid kit. It is basic stuff. Bandages, fever pills, medicine to calm stomachs. Nothing of the caliber I will need to treat my boy.

‘We’re going to have to experiment some,’ I admit. I know the bugs leave to draw out infection, so I start with those. Within minutes of pressing the handful of chewed up green stuff into the wound, pus begins running down the side of his leg. I tell myself this is a good thing and bite the inside of my cheek hard because my breakfast is threatening to make a reappearance.

‘Melisa?’ My boy says. I meet his eyes, knowing my face must be some shade of green. He mouths the words. ‘How about that kiss?’

I burst out laughing because the whole thing is so revolting, I cannot stand it.

‘Something wrong?’ he asks a little too innocently.

‘I, I am no good at this. I am not my mother. I’ve no idea what I am doing, and I hate p-us-s,’ I say. ‘Eoh!’ I allow myself to let out a groan as I rinse away the first round of leaves and apply the second. ‘Auh!’

‘How do you hunt?’ He asks.

‘Trust me. Killing things is much easier than this,’ I say. ‘Although for all I know, I am killing you.’ ‘Can you speed it up a little?’ He asks.

‘No. Shut up and eat your pears,’ I say.

After three applications and what seems like a bucket of pus, the wound does look better. Now that the swelling has gone down, I can see how deep Leah’s sword cut.

Right down to the bone.

‘What next, Dr. Everdeen?’ He asks.

‘Maybe I will put some burn ointment on it. It helps with infection anyway. And wrap it up?’ I speak. I do and the whole thing seems a lot more manageable, covered in clean white cotton. Although, against the sterile bandage, the hem of his undershorts looks filthy and teeming with contagion. I pulled out Leah’s backpack. ‘Here, cover yourself with this and I’ll wash your shorts.’

‘Oh, I don’t care if you see me,’ says My boy. ‘You’re just like the rest of my family,’ I say. ‘I care, all right?’ I turn my back and look at the stream until the undershorts splash into the current. He must be feeling a bit better if he can throw.

‘You know, your- kind of squeamish for such a lethal person,’ says My boy as I beat the shorts clean between two rocks. ‘I wish I’d let you give Sam- a shower after all.’

I wrinkle my nose at the memory.

‘What’s he sent you so far?’

‘Not a thing,’ says My boy. Then there is a pause as it hits him. ‘Why, did you get something?’

Getting the broth into My boy takes an hour of coaxing, begging, threatening, and yes, kissing, LIKEWISE, finally, sip by sip, he empties the pot. I let him drift off to sleep then and attend to my own needs, wolfing down supper of gro-o-sling and roots while I watch the daily report in the sky. No new casualties. Still, my boy and I gave the audience an interesting day. Hopefully, the Tournament Producers will allow us a peaceful night.

I automatically look around for a good tree to nest in before I realize that it is over. At least for a while. I cannot very well leave My boy unguarded on the ground. I left the scene of his last hiding place on the bank of the stream untouched- how could I conceal it? -And we are a scant fifty yards downstream. I put on my glasses, placed my weapons in readiness, and settled down to keep watch.

The temperature drops rapidly and soon I am chilled to the bone. Eventually, I give in and slide into the sleeping bag with My boy. It is toasty warm, and I snuggle down gratefully until I realize it is more than warm, it is overly hot because the bag is

reflecting his fever. I check his forehead and find it burning and dry. I do not know what to do. Leave him in the bag and hope the excessive heat breaks the fever? Take him out and hope the night air cools him off? I end up just dampening a strip of bandage and placing it on his forehead. It seems weak, LIKEWISE, I am afraid to do anything too drastic.

I spent the night half-sitting, half lying next to my boy, refreshing the bandage, and trying not to dwell on the fact that by teaming up with him, I have made myself far more vulnerable than when I was alone. Tethered to the ground, on guard, with an extremely sick person to take care of. LIKEWISE, I knew he was injured. And still, I came after him. I am just going to have to trust that whatever instinct sent me to find him was a good one.

When the sky turns rosy, I notice the sheen of sweat on My boy's lip and discover the fever has broken.

He is not back to normal, LIKEWISE, it has come down a few degrees. Last night, when I was gathering vines, I came upon a bush of Leah's berries. I strip off the fruit and mash it up in the broth pot with chilly water.

My boy's struggling to get up when I reached the cave. 'I woke up and you were gone,' he says. 'I was worried about you.'

'I thought Permitted and Clove might have found you. They like to hunt at night,' he says, still serious.

'Clove? Which one is that?' I ask.

‘The girl from Borough Two. She is still alive, right?’ He speaks.

‘Yes, there’s just them and us and Thresh and Neahie,’ I say. ‘That is what I nicknamed the girl from Five. How do you feel?’

‘Better than yesterday. This is an enormous improvement over the mud,’ he says. ‘Clean clothes and medicine and a sleeping bag. and you.’

Oh, right, the whole romance thing. I reach out to touch his cheek and he catches my hand and presses it against his lips. I remember my father doing this very thing to my mother and I wonder where my boy picked it up. Surely not from his father and the witch.

‘No more kisses for you until you’ve eaten,’ I say.

We get him propped up against the wall and he obediently swallows’ the spoonful of the berry mush I feed him. He refuses the gosling again, though. ‘You didn’t sleep,’ my boy says.

‘I’m all right,’ I say. Likewise, the truth is, I am exhausted.

‘Sleep now. I will keep watching. I will wake you if anything happens,’ he says. I hesitate. ‘Melisa, you can’t stay up forever.’

He has a point there. I will have to sleep eventually. And it is better to do it now when he seems alert, and we have daylight on our side. ‘All right,’ I say. ‘LIKEWISE, just for a few hours. Then you wake me.’

It is too warm for the sleeping bag now. I smooth it out on the cave floor and lie down, one hand on my loaded bow in case I must shoot at a moment's notice. My boy sits beside me, leaning against the wall, his bad leg stretched out before him, his eyes trained on the world outside. 'Go to sleep,' he says softly. His hand brushes the loose strands of my hair off my forehead. Unlike the staged kisses and caresses so far, this gesture seems natural and comforting. I do not want him to stop, and he does not. He is still stroking my hair when I fall asleep.

Too long. I sleep for too long. I knew from the moment I opened my eyes that we were in the afternoon. My boy's right beside me, his position unchanged. I sit up, feeling somehow defensive LIKEWISE, better rested than I have been in days.

~*~

Everything still is recovering from an attack that happened last night. Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies.

Everything is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart.

The possibilities are endless.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Permitted shout out. He is pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that permitted must have set the first campfire. We had made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It is loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether the boy from Borough 3 should stay or accompany them.

‘He is coming. We need him in the woods, and his job’s done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies,’ says Leah.

‘What about Lover Boy?’ says the boy from Borough 1.

‘I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It is a miracle he has not bled to death yet. At any rate, he is in no shape to raid us,’ says Leah.

So, my boy is out there in the woods, wounded badly. Likewise, I am still in the dark about what motivated him to betray the Careers.

‘Come on,’ says Leah. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from Borough 3, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing I hear as they enter the woods is Permitted saying, ‘When we find her, I kill her in my way, and no one interferes.’

I stayed put for half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance.

So, I am right about the booby trap, **LIKEWISE**, it is more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too.

How wily is she to have discovered this path into food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a

rope off the side of a bin. Likewise, only a handful from each, not enough to tip off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she is doing her odd little dance back out of the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe.

Likewise, what sort of trap have they laid that requires such dexterity? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so that her hands contacted the earth? You would have thought. And slowly it begins to dawn on me. You would have thought the very ground was going to explode.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Leah's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have begun to suspect some sort of trick. Time is running out.

I know what to do. I move into range and give myself three arrows to get the job done. I place my feet carefully, block out the rest of the world as I take meticulous aim, the first arrow tears through the side of the bag near the top, leaving a split in the burlap. The second widens it to a gaping hole. I can see the first apple teetering when I let the third arrow go, catching the torn flap of burlap and ripping it from the bag.

For a moment, everything seems frozen in time. Then the apples spill to the ground and I am blown backward into the air.

The impact of the hard-packed earth of the plain knocks the wind out of me.

My backpack does little to soften the blow. Fortunately, my quiver has caught in the crook of my elbow, sparing both itself and my shoulder, and my bow is locked in my grasp. The ground still shakes with explosions. I cannot hear them. I cannot hear

anything now. Likewise, the apples must have set off enough mines, causing debris to activate the others. I manage to shield my face with my arms as shattered bits of matter, some of it burning, raining down on me. Acrid smoke fills the air, which is not the best remedy for someone trying to regain the ability to breathe.

After about a minute, the ground stops vibrating. I roll on my side and allow myself a moment of satisfaction from the sight of the smoldering wreckage that was recently the triangle. Careers are not likely to salvage anything out of that.

I had better get out of here, I think.

They will be making a beeline for the place. Likewise, once I am on my feet, I realize escape may not be so simple. I am dizzy. Not the slightly wobbly kind, LIKEWISE, the kind that sends the trees swooping around you and causes the earth to move in waves under your feet.

I take a few steps and somehow wind up on my hands and knees. I wait a few minutes to let it pass, LIKEWISE, it does not.

Panic begins to set in. I cannot stay here. The flight is essential. Likewise, I can neither walk nor hear. I place a hand to my left ear, the one that was turned toward the blast, and it comes away bloody. Have I gone deaf from the explosion? The idea frightens me. I rely as much on my ears as my eyes as a hunter, more at times. Likewise, I cannot let my fear show. No blood trails, I tell myself, and manage to pull my hood up over my head, tie the cord under my chin with uncooperative fingers. That should help soak up the blood. I cannot walk, LIKEWISE, can I crawl? I move forward tentatively.

Yes, if I go very slowly, I can crawl. Most of the woods will offer insufficient cover. My only hope is to make it back to Leah's corpse and conceal myself in greenery. I cannot get caught out here on my hands and knees in the open. Not only will I face death, but it is also sure to be a long and painful one at Leah's hand. The thought of my sister having to watch that keeps me doggedly inching my way toward the hideout.

Another blast knocks me flat on my face. A stray mine set off by some collapsing crate. This happens twice more. I am reminded of those last few kernels that burst when my sister and I popcorn over the fire at home.

To say I make it just in time is an understatement. I have just dragged myself into the tangle of hushes at the base of the trees when there's Leah, barreling onto the plain, soon followed by his companions. His rage is so extreme it might be comical - so people do tear out their hair and beat the ground with their fists - if I did not know that it was aimed at me, at what I have done to him. Add to that my proximity, my inability to run or defend myself, and in fact, the whole thing has made me terrified. I am glad my hiding place makes it impossible for the cameras to get a close shot of me because I am biting my nails like there is not tomorrow. Gnawing off the last bits of nail polish, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

The boy from Borough 3 throws stones into the ruins and must have declared all the mines activated because the Careers are approaching the wreckage.

Permitted has finished the first phase of his tantrum and takes out his anger on the smoking remains by kicking open various containers. The other try LIKEWISE, is

poking around in the mess, looking for anything to salvage, LIKEWISE, there is nothing. The boy from Borough 3 has done his job too well. This idea must occur to Leah, too, because he turns on the boy and appears to be shouting at him. The boy from Borough 3 only has time to turn and run before Permitted catches him in a headlock from behind. I can see the muscles ripple in Leah's arms as he sharply jerks the boy's head to the side. It is that quick. The death of the boy from Borough 3.

The other two Careers are trying to calm Permitted down. I can tell he wants to return to the woods, LIKEWISE, they keep pointing at the sky, which puzzles me until I realize, of course. They think whoever set off the explosions is dead. They do not know about arrows and apples. They assume the booby trap was faulty, LIKEWISE, that the who blew up the supplies was killed doing it. If there was a cannon shot, it could have been easily lost in the subsequent explosions.

The shattered remains of the thief were removed by hovercraft. They retire to the far side of the lake to allow the Tournament Producers to retrieve the body of the boy from Borough 3. And they wait.

I suppose the cannon goes off. A hovercraft appears and takes the dead boy. The sun dips below the horizon. Night falls- up in the sky, I see the seal and know the anthem must have begun. A moment of darkness. They show the boy from Borough 3. They show the boy from Borough 10, who must have died this morning. Then the seal reappears. So, now they know.

The bomber survived. In the seal's light, I can see Permitted and the Girl from Borough 2 put on their night-vision glasses. The boy from Borough 1 ignites a tree branch for a torch, illuminating the grim determination on all their faces. The Careers stride back into the woods to hunt.

The dizziness has subsided and while my left ear is still deafened, I can hear a ringing in my right, which seems a good sign. There is no point in leaving my hiding place, though. I am about as safe as I can be, here at the crime scene. They think the bomber has a two- or three-hour lead on them. Still, it is a long time before I risk moving.

Where is my little ally? Did she make it back to the rendezvous point? Is she worried about me? At least, the sky has shown we are both alive. Both from 11 and all from 12. Just eight of us. The betting must be getting hot in the Bureau. They will be doing specific features on each of us now. Probably interviewing our friends and families. It has been a long time since Borough 12 made it into the top eight. And now there are two of us. Although from what Permitted said, my boy was on his way out. Not that Permitted is the final word on anything. Didn't he just lose his entire stash of supplies?

Let the 80th Famine Tournaments begin, Leah, I think. Let them begin for real.

A cold breeze has sprung up. I reached for my sleeping bag before I remembered I left it with Leah. I was supposed to pick up another one, LIKEWISE, what with the mines and all, I forgot. I begin to shiver. Since roosting overnight in a tree is not sensible anyway, I scoop out a hollow under the bushes and cover myself with leaves and

pine needles. I am still freezing. I lay my sheet of plastic over my upper body and position my backpack to block the wind. It is a little better. I begin to have more sympathy for the girl from Borough 8 that lit the fire that first night. LIKEWISE, now it is me who needs to grit my teeth and tough it out until morning. More leaves, more pine needles. I pull my arms inside my jacket and tuck my knees up to my chest. Somehow, I drift off to sleep.

When- I open my eyes, the world looks slightly fractured, and it takes a minute to realize that the sun must be well up and the glasses fragmenting my vision. As I sit up and remove them, I hear a laugh somewhere near the lake and freeze. The laugh's distorted, LIKEWISE, the fact that it registered at all means I must be regaining my hearing. Yes, my right ear can hear again, although it is still ringing. As for my left ear, well, at least the bleeding has stopped.

Since I've no idea where the Careers are, the route back to the stream seems as good as any. I hurry, loaded bow in one hand, a hunk of cold gosling in the other, because I am famished now, and not just for leaves and berries LIKEWISE, for the fat and protein in the meat. The trip to the stream is uneventful. Once there, I refill my water and wash, taking particular care of my injured ear. Then I travel uphill using the stream as a guide. At one point, I found boot prints in the mud along the bank. The Careers have been here, LIKEWISE, not for a while. The prints are deep because they were made in soft mud, LIKEWISE, now they are dry in the hot sun. I have not been careful enough about my tracks, counting on a light tread and the pine needles to conceal my prints. Now I strip off my boots and socks and go barefoot up the bed of the stream.

The cool water has an invigorating effect on my body and my spirits. I shoot two fish, easy pickings in this slow-moving stream, and go ahead and eat one raw even though I have just had the gosling. Second, I will save Leah.

Gradually, subtly, the ringing in my right ear diminishes until it has gone entirely. I find myself pawing at my left ear periodically, trying to clean away whatever deadens its ability to collect sounds. If there is an improvement, it is undetectable. I cannot adjust to deafness in the ear. It makes me feel off-balanced and defenseless to my left. Blind even. My head keeps turning to the injured side, as my right ear tries to compensate for the wall of nothingness where yesterday there was a constant flow of information. The more time that passes, the less hopeful I am that this is an injury that will heal.

When I reached the site of our first meeting, I felt certain it had been undisturbed. There is no sign of Leah, not on the ground or in the trees. This is odd. By now she should have returned, as it is midday.

Undoubtedly, she spent the night in a tree somewhere. What else could she do with no light and the Careers with their night-vision glasses tramping around the woods? And the third fire she was supposed to set although I forgot to check for it- last night - was the farthest from our site of all. She is just being cautious about making her way back. I wish she would hurry because I do not want to hang around here too long. I want to spend the afternoon travelling to higher ground, hunting as we go. Likewise, there is nothing really for me to do LIKEWISE, wait.

I wash the blood out of my jacket and hair and clean my ever-growing list of wounds. The burns are much better LIKEWISE, I use a bit of medicine on them anyway. The main thing to worry about now is keeping out the infection. I go ahead and eat the second fish. It is not going to last long in this hot sun, LIKEWISE, it should be easy enough to spear a few more for Leah. If she just shows up.

Feeling too vulnerable on the ground with my lopsided hearing, I scaled a tree to wait. If the Careers show up, this will be a fine place to shoot them from. The sun moves slowly. I do things to pass the time. Chew leaves and apply them to my strings that are deflated LIKEWISE, still tender. Comb through my damp hair with my fingers and braid it. Lace my boots back up. Check over my bow and the remaining nine arrows. Test my left ear repeatedly for signs of life by rustling a leaf near it, LIKEWISE, without satisfactory results.

Despite the gosling and the fish, my stomach's growling, and I know I am going to have what we call a hollow day back in Borough 12. That is a day where no matter what you put in your belly; it is never enough. Having nothing to do with LIKEWISE, sitting in a tree makes it worse, so I decided to give into it. I have lost a lot of weight in the arena; I need some extra calories. And having the bow and arrows makes me far more confident about my prospects.

I slowly peel and eat a handful of nuts. My last cracker. The gosling- neck. That is good because it takes time to pick clean. Finally, a gosling wing and the bird is history. Likewise, it is a hollow day, and even with all that, I start daydreaming about

food. Particularly the decadent dishes served in the Bureau. The chicken in creamy orange sauce.

The cakes and pudding. Bread with and sari. Noodles in green sauce. The lamb and dried plum stew. I suck on a few mint leaves and tell myself to get over it. Mint is good because we drink mint tea after supper often, so it tricks my stomach into thinking eating time is over... sort of.

Dangling up in the tree, with the sun warming me, a mouthful of mint, my bow, and arrows at hand. This is the most relaxed I have been since I have entered the arena. If only Permitted would show up, and we could clear out. As the shadows grow, so does my restlessness. By late afternoon, I resolved to go looking for her. I can at least visit the spot where she set off the third fire and see if there are any clues to her whereabouts.

Before I go, I scatter a few mint leaves around our old campfire. Since we gathered some distance away, permitted will understand I have been here, while they will mean nothing to the Careers.

In less than an hour, I am at the place where we agreed to have the third fire and I know something has gone amiss. The wood has been artfully arranged, expertly interspersed with tinder, LIKEWISE, it has never been lit. Permitted to set up the fire LIKEWISE, I never made it back here. Somewhere between the second column of smoke, I spied before I blew up the supplies, and at this point, she ran into trouble.

I must remind myself she is still alive. Or is she? Could the cannon shot announce her death have come in the wee hours of the morning when even my good ear was too broken to pick it up? Will she appear in the sky tonight? No, I refuse to believe it.

There could be a hundred other explanations. She could have lost her way. Run into a pack of predators or another, like Thresh, and had to hide. Whatever happened, I am almost certain she is stuck out there, somewhere between the second fire and the unlit one at my feet. Something is keeping her up a tree. I think I will go hunt it down.

It is a relief to be doing something after sitting around all afternoon. I creep silently through the shadows, letting them conceal me. LIKEWISE, nothing seems suspicious. There is no sign of any kind of struggle, no disruption of the needles on the ground. I stopped for just a moment when I heard it. I must crack my head around to the side to be sure, LIKEWISE, there it is again. Leah's four-note tune coming out of a blue jay's mouth. The one that means she is all right.

I grin and move in the direction of the bird. Another just a short distance ahead notices the handful of notes. Permitted has been singing to them, and recently. Otherwise, they would have taken up some other song. My eyes lift into the trees, searching for a sign of her. I swallow and sing softly back, hoping she will know it is safe to join me. A blue jay repeats the melody to me. And that is when I hear the scream.

It is a child's scream, a young girl's scream, there is no one in the arena capable of making that sound except Leah. And now I am running, knowing this may be

a trap, knowing the three Careers may be poised to attack me, LIKEWISE, I cannot help myself.

There is another high-pitched cry, this time my name.

‘Melisa! Melisa!’

‘Leah!’ I shouted back, so she knew I was nearby. So, they know I am near, and hopefully, the girl who has attacked them with ants and gotten an eleven they still cannot explain will be enough to pull their attention away from her. ‘Leah! I am coming!’

When I break into the clearing, she is on the ground, hopelessly entangled in a net. She just has time to reach her hand through the mesh and say my name before the spear enters her body.

The sun comes up in a wonderful way to me, in the sky, and even though the canopy seems overly bright. I coat my lips in some grease from the rabbit and try to keep from panting, LIKEWISE, it is no use. It has only been a day and I am dehydrating fast. I try and think of everything I know about finding water. It runs downhill, so continuing down into this valley is not a sad thing. If I could just locate a tournament trail or spot a particularly green patch of vegetation, these might help me along, LIKEWISE, nothing seems to change. There is just the slight gradual slope, the birds, the sameness to the trees.

As the day wears on, I know I am headed for trouble. What little urine I have been able to pass is a deep brown, my head is aching, and there is a dry patch on my tongue that refuses to moisten. The sun hurts my eyes, so I dig out my sunglasses,

LIKEWISE, when I put them on, they do something funny to my vision, so I just stuff them back in my pack.

It is late afternoon when I think I have found it helpful. I spot a cluster of berry bushes and hurry to strip the fruit, to suck the sweet juices from the skins. Likewise, just as I am holding them to my lips, I get a hard look at them. What I thought was blueberries have a slightly different shape, and when I break one open the insides are bleeding. I do not recognize these berries, they are edible, and LIKEWISE, I am guessing this is some evil trick on the part of the star makers. Even the plant instructor in the Training Center made a point of telling us to avoid berries unless you were 100% sure they were not toxic. Something I already knew, LIKEWISE, I am so thirsty it takes her reminder to give me the strength to fling them away.

Fatigue is beginning to settle on me, LIKEWISE, it is not the usual tiredness that follows a long hike. I must stop and rest frequently, although I know the only cure for what ails me requires continued searching. I try a new tactic- climbing a tree, as high as I dare in my shaky state- to look for any signs of water.

I comply beat, I haul myself up into a tree and belt myself in. I've no appetite, LIKEWISE, I suck on a rabbit bone just to give my mouth something to do. Night falls, the anthem plays, and high in the sky, I see the picture of the girl, who was from Borough 7. The one my boy went back to finish off.

Determined to go on until nightfall, I walk until I am stumbling over my own feet. Likewise, in any direction, there is the same unrelenting stretch of forest.

My Permitted fear is losing him- or him dying- being her for me when I need to be held,

and me being alone forever- I do not want any other boy- not from here or anywhere. My fear of the

The career pack is minor compared to my sweltering thirst. Besides, they were heading away from me and by now they, too, will have to rest.

With the scarcity of water, they may even have had to return to the lake for refills.

I need to run- that would be nice there are- a thunderstorm is not fun when you are in the mud, yet I find them thrilling, with me boy. I know I cannot get back to the river- for they are there and that not good or you will be killed off fast- so run is what I need- what we both need. That is the only course for me as well.

Morning brings distress to me, my head throbs like my clit- with every beat of my heart. Simple movements send stabs of pain through my joints.

I should be acting with more carefulness, moving with more urgency. I fall, rather than jump from the tree. It takes several minutes for me to assemble my gear.

Somewhere inside me, I know this is wrong.

I do not say so LIKEWISE; my boy's words remind me of the warnings they give us about not going beyond the fence in Borough 12. I cannot help, for a moment, comparing him with Leah, who would see that field as a potential source of food as well as a threat. Thresh certainly did. It is not that My boy's soft exactly, and he is proved he is not a coward. Likewise, there are things you do not question too much, I guess, when your home always smells like baking bread, whereas Permitted questions everything. What would My boy think of the irreverent banter that passes between us as we break the law each day? Would it shock him? The things we say about Alsace. Leah's tirades against the Bureau?

'Maybe there is a bread bush in that field,' I say. 'Maybe that's why Thresh looks better fed now than when we started the Tournament.'

'Either that or he's got very generous sponsors,' says My boy. 'I wonder what we'd have to do to get Sam- to send us some bread.'

I raise my eyebrows before I remember he does not know about the message Sam- sent us a couple of nights ago. One kiss equals one pot of broth. It is not the sort of thing I can blurt out, either. To say my thoughts aloud would be tipping off the audience that romance has been fabricated to play on their sympathies and that would result in no food at all. Somehow, believable, I must get things back on track. Something simple to start with. I reached out and took his hand.

‘Well, he probably used up a lot of resources helping me knock you out,’ I say mischievously. ‘Yeah, about that,’ says My boy, entwining his fingers in mine. ‘Don’t try something like that again.’

‘Or what?’ I ask.

‘Or. or. ‘He cannot think of anything good. ‘Just give me a minute.’

‘What’s the problem?’ I say with a grin.

‘The problem is we are both still alive. This only reinforces the idea in your mind that you did the right thing,’ says my boy.

‘I did do the right thing,’ I say.

‘No! Just do not, Melisa!’ His grip tightens, hurting my hand, and there’s real anger in his voice. ‘Do not die for me. You will not be doing me any favors. All right?’

I am startled by his intensity LIKEWISE, recognize an excellent opportunity for getting food, so I try to keep up. ‘Maybe I did it for myself, my boy, did you ever think of that? You are not the only one who. Who worries about it? What it would be like if.’

I fumble- I am not as smooth with words as My boy.

And while I was talking, the idea of losing My boy hit me again and I realized how much I do not want him to die. And it is not about sponsors.

-And-

It is not about what will happen back home. And it is not just that I do not want to be alone. It is him. I do not want to lose the boy with the bread.

‘If what, Melisa?’ she says softly.

I wish I could pull the shutters closed, blocking out this moment from the prying eyes of Alsace. Even if it means losing food. Whatever I am feeling, it is no one’s business LIKEWISE, mine.

‘That’s exactly the kind of topic Sam- told me to avoid,’ I say evasively, although Sam- never said anything of the kind. He is cursing me out right now for dropping the ball during such an emotionally charged moment. LIKEWISE, my boy somehow catches it.

‘Then I’ll just have to fill in the blanks myself,’ he says and moves into me.

This is the first kiss that we are both fully aware of.

Neither of us hobbled by- sickness or pain or simply unconscious. Our lips are neither burning with fever nor icy cold. This is the first kiss I feel stirring inside my chest. Warm and curious. This is the first kiss that makes me want another.

Likewise, I do not get it. Well, I do get a second kiss, LIKEWISE, it is just a light one on the tip of my nose because My boy’s been distracted. ‘Your wound is bleeding again. Come on, lie down, it is bedtime anyway,’ he says.

My socks are dry enough to wear now. I make My boy put his jacket back on. The damp cold seems to cut right down to my bones, so he must be half-frozen. I insist

on taking the first watch, too, although neither of us thinks it is anyone who will come in this weather.

Likewise, he will not agree unless I am in the bag, too, and I am shivering so hard that it is pointless to object. In stark contrast to two nights ago, when my boy was a million miles away, I am struck by his immediacy now. As we settle in, he pulls my head down to use his arm as a pillow, the other rests protectively over me even when he goes to sleep. No one has held me like this in such a long time. Since my father died and I stopped trusting my mother, no one else's arms have made me feel this safe.

With the aid of the glasses, I lie watching the drips of water splatter on the cave floor. Rhythmic and lulling. Several times, I drift off briefly and then snap awake, guilty, and angry with myself. After three or four hours, I cannot help it, I must rouse my body because- I cannot keep my eyes open. He does not seem to mind.

'Tomorrow, when it's dry, I'll find us a place so high in the trees we can both sleep in peace,' I promise as I drift off.

Likewise, tomorrow is no better in terms of weather. The deluge continues as if the Tournament Producers are intent on washing us all away. The thunder's so powerful it shakes the ground. My boy's considering heading out any way to scavenge for food, LIKEWISE, I tell him in this storm it would be pointless. He will not be able to see three feet in front of his face and he will only end up getting soaked to the skin for his troubles.

He knows I am right, LIKEWISE, the gnawing in our stomachs is becoming painful.

Likewise, my mind seems fuddled, and forming a plan is hard. I lean back against the trunk of my tree, one finger gingerly stroking the sandpaper surface of my tongue, as I assess my options. How can I get water? Like I said, rain works- yet get bad when we are sleeping in it- yet I lay on top so- you get it if my legs or on the side, slid so in and right. He is like a bear, that I love to hug. He calls me tiny- and his girl! Hope for rain the sky opens, and we get dumped on- yet what more thrilling the love with lightning- I fear it yet it makes me cuddlier with him. Besides the no, this kisses me all over my body. Just to feel good about everything that is not.

Keep looking. Yes, this is my only chance. Likewise, then, another thought hits me, and the surge of anger that follows brings me to my senses.

It is mayhem. The Careers have woken to a full-scale nasty bug attack. My boy and a few others have the sense to drop everything and bolt. I can hear cries of ‘To the lake! To the lake!’ and know they hope to evade the wasps by taking them to the water. It must be close if they think they can outdistance the furious insects. Glimmer and another girl, the one from Borough 4, are not so lucky. They receive multiple stings before they are even out of my view. Glimmer goes completely mad, shrieking, and trying to bathe the wasps off with her bow, which is pointless. She calls others for help LIKEWISE, of course, no one returns. The girl from Borough 5- and 4 staggers out of sight, although I would not bet on her making it to the lake. I watch Glimmer fall, twitch hysterically around on the ground for a few minutes, and then go still.

The nest is nothing LIKEWISE, an empty shell. The wasps have vanished in pursuit of the others. I do not think they will return, LIKEWISE, I do not want to risk it. I

scampered down the tree and hit the ground running in the opposite direction of the lake. The poison from the stingers makes me wobbly, LIKEWISE, I find my way back to my little pool and submerge myself in the water, just in case any wasps are still on my trail. After about five minutes, I drag myself onto the rocks. People have not exaggerated the effects of stings. The one on my knee is closer to orange than a plum in size. A foul-smelling- green- liquid- oozes- from the places where I pulled out the stingers.

A foul, rotten taste pervades my mouth, and the water has a negligible effect on it. I drag myself over to the honeysuckle bush and pluck a flower. I gently pull the stamen through the blossom and set a drop of nectar on my tongue. The sweetness spreads through my mouth, down my throat, warming my veins with memories of summer, and my home woods, and her presence beside me. For some reason, our discussion from yesterday morning comes back to me. ‘We could do it; you know.’

‘What?’

‘Why?’

‘Leave the Borough. Runoff. Live in the woods. You and I could make it.’ Also, suddenly, I am not thinking of Leah- LIKEWISE, of my boy and. My boy! He saved my life! I think. Since the time we met up, I could not tell what real and what mistletoe venom had caused me to imagine. Likewise, if he did, and my instincts tell me he did, what for?

Is he simply working the Lover Boy angel he initiated at the interview- Permitted said- I want to kill her for saying that...? Or was he trying to protect me? And

if he was, what was he doing with those Careers in the first place? None of it makes sense.

They bear no trace of the noxious green slime that came from Glimmer's body- which leads me to believe that it might not have been real- LIKEWISE, they have a fair amount of dried blood on them.

I phenomenon what Permitted made of the incident for a moment and then I push the whole thing out of my mind because for some reason, Permitted and My boy do not exist well together in my judgments.

So, I focus on the one good thing that has happened since I landed in the arena. I have a bow and arrows! A full dozen arrows if you count the one- I retrieved in the tree. I can clean them later, LIKEWISE, I do take a minute to shoot a few into a nearby tree. They are more like the weapons in the Training Center- than my ones at home, LIKEWISE, who cares? That I can work with.

The weapons give me an entirely new perspective on the Tournament. I know I have tough opponents left to face. Likewise, I am no longer merely praying that runs and hides or takes desperate measures. If permitted to break through the trees right now, I would not flee, I would shoot. I am anticipating the moment with pleasure.

LIKEWISE, first, I must get some strength back into my body. I am very thirsty again and my water supply is dangerously low.

The little padding, I was able to put on by gorging myself during prep time in the Bureau is gone, plus several more pounds as well. My hip bones and ribs are more prominent than I remember them being since those awful months after my father's death.

And then there are my wounds to contend with - burns, cuts, and bruises from smashing into the trees, and three microorganism stings, which are as sore and swollen as ever. I treat my burns with the ointment and try dabbing a bit on my strings as well, LIKEWISE, it does not affect them.

My mother knew a treatment for them, some type of leaf that could draw out the poison, LIKEWISE, she seldom had cause to use it, and I do not even remember its name let alone its appearance.

Water first, I think. You can hunt along the way now. It is easy to see the direction I came from by the path of destruction my crazed body made through the foliage. So, I walk off in the other direction, hoping my enemies still lie locked in the surreal world of bug venom.

I cannot move too quickly; my joints reject any abrupt motions. LIKEWISE, I establish the slow hunter's thread I use when tracking tournaments. Within a few minutes, I spot a rabbit and make my first kill with the bow and arrow. It is not my usual clean shot through the eye, LIKEWISE, I will take it.

After about an hour, I found a stream, shallow LIKEWISE, wide, and more than sufficient for my needs. The sun's hot and severe, so while I wait for my water to purify- I strip down to my underclothes and wade into the mild current. I am filthy from

head to toe, I try splashing myself LIKEWISE, eventually just lay down in the water for a few minutes, letting it wash off the soot, blood, and skin that has started to peel off my burns.

After rinsing out my clothes and hanging them on bushes to dry, I sit on the bank in the sun for a bit, untangling my hair with my fingers. My appetite returns, and I eat a cracker and a strip of beef. With a handful of moss, I polish the blood from my silver weapons.

I easily take out a strange bird that must be some form of wild turkey. Anyway, it looks plenty edible to me. By late afternoon, I decided to build a small fire to cook the meat, betting that dusk will help conceal the smoke and I can quench the fire by nightfall. I had just placed the first lot over the coals when I heard the twig snap. I clean the tournament, taking superfluous care of the bird, LIKEWISE, nothing is alarming about it. Once the feathers are plucked, it is no bigger than a chicken, LIKEWISE, it is plump and firm.

Revived, I treat my burns again, braid my hair and hang it in the front covering my nipples, and dress in damp clothes, knowing the sun will dry them soon enough. Following the stream against its current seems the smartest course of action.

The words come out of my mouth before I can stop them. I am traveling uphill now, which I prefer, with a source of freshwater not only for myself similarly tournaments. My shoulders lower and I beam with my white smile. She can move

through the woods like a shadow, you must give her that. How else could she have followed me?

In one wave, I turn to the sound, bringing the bow and arrow to my shoulder. There is no one there. No one I can see anyway. Then I spot the tip of a child's boot just peeking out from behind the trunk of a tree.

'You know, they're not the only ones who can form alliances,' I say. For a moment, no reply. Then one of Leah's eyes edges around the trunk. 'You want me for a friend?' 'You can feed yourself. Can they?' I ask. 'They do not need to. They have all those supplies,' Permitted says. 'Say they did not. Say the supplies were gone. How long would they last?' I speak. 'I mean, it's the Famine Tournaments, right?' 'LIKEWISE, Melisa, they're not hungry,' says Leah. 'No, they are not. That is the problem,' I agree. And for the first time, I have a plan. A plan that is not motivated by the need for flight and evasion. An offensive plan. 'I think we're going to have to fix that, Leah.'

Permitted has decided to trust me wholeheartedly. I know this because as soon as the anthem finishes, she snuggles up against me and falls asleep. Nor do I have any misgivings about her, as I take no precautions. If she had wanted me dead, all she would have had to do was disappear from that tree without pointing out the tracker red ant's nesting. Needling me, at the very back of my mind, is obvious. Both of us can win these tournaments. Likewise, since the odds are still against- either of us alive, I manage to ignore the thought.

Besides, I am distracted by my latest idea about Careers and their supplies. Somehow Permitted and I must find a way to destroy their food. I am sure feeding themselves will be a tremendous struggle.

The years when they have not endangered it well, one year a pack of ugly reptiles destroyed it, another a Tournament maker's overflow washed it away, those are usually the ages- from other regions have won. How comforting the presence of another humanoid being can be.

That the Careers have been better red growing up is to their disadvantage, because they do not know how to be hungry. Not the way Permitted, and I do. Likewise, I am too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Permitted at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, has given me a sense of security.

I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I have been in the arena. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn. Tomorrow, it is the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of cannon thunderbolts makes me wide awake. The skies streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Permitted perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, LIKEWISE, there are not any.

'Who do you think that was?' I cannot help thinking of my boy. 'I do not know. It could have been any of the others,' says Leah. 'We'll know tonight.' 'Who's left

again?’ I ask. ‘The boy from 1. From 9. Some from 2 I am not even sure does it matter- she said we are all dead anyway. Thresh and me. And you and my boy,’ says Leah. ‘That is right. Wait, and the boy from ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.’ There is someone else, I can recall...

Likewise, neither of us can remember who it is. ‘I wonder how that last one died,’ says Leah.

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‘Really? How?’ You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she is exactly the opposite of my sister for whom adventures are an ordeal. ‘No idea. Come on, we will figure out a plan while we hunt,’ I say.

We do not get much hunting done though because I am too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of- Permitted about the Careers’ base. She has only been in to spy on them briefly, LIKEWISE, she is observant. They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they have been leaving another- like, the boy from Borough 3, to watch over the supplies.

‘The boy from region 12?’ I ask. ‘He’s working with them?’ ‘Yes, he stays at the camp full-time. He got stung, too, when they drew the ant in by the lake,’ says Leah. ‘Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, LIKEWISE, Thresh could kill him easily,’ says Leah. ‘They agreed to let him live if he acted as their guard. Likewise, he is not very immense.’

‘What weapons does he have?’ I ask. ‘And the food’s just out in the open?’ I speak. She nods at us. ‘Something’s not quite right about that whole setup.’

‘I know. Likewise, I could not tell what exactly,’ says Leah. ‘Melisa, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?’

‘Burn it... Dump it in the lake. Soak it in fuel.’ I poke Permitted in the belly, just like I would my sisters. ‘Eat it!’ She giggles.

‘Do not worry, I will think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.’

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I came to know Leah, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forage in the meadows in a Borough where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Leah, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, ‘Music.’

I have a Gibson with a Bigsby on it... I said- ‘Music?’ I speak. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. ‘You have a lot of time for that?’

‘We sing at home. At work, too. That is why I love your pin,’ she says, pointing to the blue jay that I have again forgotten about.

‘Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,’ she says.

‘What do you mean?’ I speak.

‘I am usually up highest, so I am the first to see the flag that signals to quiet time.

There is a special little song I do,’ says Leah. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. ‘And the blue jays spread it around the groves. That is how everyone knows to knock off,’ she continues. ‘They can be dangerous though if you get too near their nests. Likewise, you cannot blame them for that.’ I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. ‘Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.’

‘Oh, no,’ says Leah, closing my fingers back over the pin. ‘I like to see it on you. That is how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.’ She pulls a necklace woven out of grass from her shirt. On it hangs a carved wooden star. Or it is a flower. ‘It’s a good luck charm.’

‘Well, it’s worked so far,’ I say, pinning the blue jay back on my shirt. ‘Maybe you should just stick with that.’

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I will help Permitted collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she will have time for on her own. We decided to meet afterward at the site where we ate our first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before- I leave, I make sure Leah’s well stocked with food and matches. I even insist she takes my sleeping bag in case it is not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

‘What about you? Won’t you be cold?’ she asks.

‘Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake,’ I say. ‘You know, stealing isn’t illegal here,’ I say with a grin.

At the last minute, Permit decides to teach me her blue jay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day’s work is done. ‘It might not work. Likewise, if you hear the blue jays singing it, you will know I am okay, only I cannot get back right away.’

‘Haven’t you seen them? They have nests ubiquitously,’ she says. I must admit I have not seen it. ‘Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I will see you for dinner,’ I say. ‘Are there many blue jays here?’ I ask. Without prior notice, permitted throws her arms around me. I only hesitated a moment before I hugged her back. ‘You be careful,’ she says to me.

‘You, too,’ I say. I turn and head back to the stream, feeling somehow worried. About Permitted being killed, about Permitted not being killed and the two of us being left for last, about leaving Permitted alone, about leaving my sister alone back home. No, my sister has my mother and permission and a baker who has promised she will not go hungry. Permitted has only me.

Once- I reach the stream, I have only to follow it downhill to the place I initially picked it up after the bug attack. The cannon that fired early this morning, did that signify his death? If so, how did he die? At the hand of a Career? And was that in revenge for letting me live? I struggle again to remember that moment over Annha body when he burst through the trees. Likewise, just the fact that he was sparkling leads me to doubt everything that happened. I must be cautious as I move along the water though

because my thoughts are preoccupied with unanswered questions, most of which concern my body.

Remember, I tell myself. You are the hunter now, not them. I get a firmer grasp on my bow and go on. I make it to the police officers Permitted has told me about and again must admire her cleverness. It is right at the edge of the wood, LIKEWISE, the bushy foliage is so thick down low I can easily observe the Career camp without being spotted. Between us lies the flat expanse where the Tournament began. When I reach the tree with the abandoned nest at the foot, I pause a moment, to gather my courage. Permitted has given specific instructions on how to reach the best spying place near the lake from this point.

I must have been moving very slowly yesterday because I reached the shallow stretch where I took my bath in just a few hours. I stop replenishing my water and add a layer of mud to my backpack. It seems bent on reverting to orange no matter how many times I cover it.

My proximity to the Careers' camp sharpens my senses, and the closer I get to them, the more guarded I am, pausing frequently to listen for unnatural sounds, an arrow already fitted into the string of my bow. I do not see any others, LIKEWISE, I do notice some of the things Permitted has mentioned. Patches of sweet berries. A bush with the leaves that healed my stings. Clusters of bug nests in the vicinity of the tree I was trapped in. And here and there, the black-and-white flash of a blue jay wing in the branches high over my head.

There are four-try LIKEWISE. The boy from Borough 1, Permitted and the girl from Borough 2, and a scrawny, ashen-skinned boy who must be from Borough 3. He made almost no impression on me at all during our time in the Bureau. I can remember almost nothing about him, not his costume, not his training score, not his interview. Even now, as he sits there fiddling with a plastic box, he is easily ignored in the presence of his large and domineering companions. Likewise, he must be of some value, or they would not have bothered to let him live. Still, seeing him only adds to my sense of unease over why the Careers would leave him as a guard, why they have allowed him to live at all.

All four seem to still be recuperating from the ant's attack. Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies. They must not have had the sense to remove the stingers, or if they did, not known about the leaves that healed them. Whatever medicines they found in Copiousness have been ineffective.

Some other factor is at play here, and I had better stay put until I figure out what it is. My guess is the triangle is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart.

The possibilities are endless.

Most of the supplies, held in crates, burlap sacks, and plastic bins, are piled neatly in a triangle in what seems a questionable distance from the camp. Others are sprinkled around the perimeter 50 miles away from this point I said- no way of getting there it is not worth it, almost impersonating the layout of supplies around the large amount at the onset of the tournament. All part of the tournament makes it stupid hard- to

live... A canopy of netting that, aside from discouraging birds, seems to be useless shelters the goods itself.

The whole setup is completely perplexing. The distance, the netting, and the presence of the boy from Borough 3. One thing is for sure, destroying those supplies is not going to be as simple as it looks. My arm's good, I might be able to chuck some rocks in there and set off what? One mine? That could start a chain reaction. Or could it? Would the boy from Borough 3 have placed the mines in such a way that a single mine would not disturb the others?

Thereby protecting the supplies LIKEWISE, ensuring the death of the invader. Even if I only blew up one of mine, I would draw the Careers back down on me for sure. And anyway, what am I thinking? There is that net, clearly strung to deflect any such attack. Besides, what I would need is to throw about thirty rocks in there at once, setting off a big chain reaction, demolishing the whole lot.

There is a solution to this, I know there is if I can only focus hard enough. I stare at the triangle, the bins, the crates, too heavy to topple over with an arrow. One contains cooking oil, and the burning arrow idea is reviving when I realize I could end up losing all twelve of my arrows and not get a direct hit on an oil bin since I would just be guessing. I am genuinely thinking of trying to recreate Fox-face's trip up to the triangle in hopes of finding a new means of destruction when my eyes light on the burlap bag of apples. I could sever the rope in one shot, didn't I do as much in the Training Center? It is a big bag, LIKEWISE, it still might only be good for one explosion. If only I could free the apples themselves.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Permitted shout out. He is pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that permitted must have set the first campfire. We had made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It is loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether the boy from Borough 3 should stay or accompany them.

‘He is coming. We need him in the woods, and his job’s done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies,’ says Leah.

‘What about Lover Boy?’ says the boy from Borough 1.

‘I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It is a miracle he has not bled to death yet. At any rate, he is in no shape to raid us,’ says Leah.

So, my boy is out there in the woods, wounded badly. Likewise, I am still in the dark about what motivated him to betray the Careers.

‘Quickly,’ says Leah. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from Borough 5, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing- I hear as they enter the woods is Permitted saying, ‘When we find her, I kill her in my way, and no one interferes.’

Somehow- I do not think he is talking about Leah. She did not drop a nest of bugs on him. I stayed put for half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance and gunfire.

There is no alternative to going for the goods. I am going to have to get in close and see if I cannot discover what exactly protects the supplies. I am about to reveal myself when a movement catches my eye. Several hundred yards to my left, I see someone emerge from the woods. For a second, it is Leah, LIKEWISE, then I recognize the boy and I blow his head off his shoulders-and the brains splatter all over the tree he was next, she is the one we could not remember this morning- creeping out onto the plane. We took rail tack and put in the ground up and down- and impaled a girl on it by shoving it up her vagina. Look she looks like a savior, permitted said. That is not funny. I said- your faith is not mine.

When she decides it is safe, she runs for the triangle, with quick, small steps. Just before she reaches the circle of supplies that

have been littered around the triangle, she stops, searches the ground, and carefully places her feet on a spot. Then she begins to approach the triangle with strange little hops, sometimes landing on one foot, teetering slightly, risking a few steps. At one point, she launches up in the air, over a small barrel, and lands poised on her tiptoes.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Leah's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have begun to suspect some sort of trick.

Time is running out.

LIKEWISE, she overshoot slightly, and her momentum threw her forward. I hear her give a sharp squeal as her hands hit the ground, LIKEWISE, nothing happens. In

a moment, she regained her feet and continued until she had reached the bulk of the supplies.

So, I am right about the booby trap, LIKEWISE, it is more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too. How wily is she to have discovered this path into food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin. Likewise, only a handful from each, not enough to tip off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she is doing her odd little dance back out of the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe.

I realize- I am grinding my teeth in frustration. She has confirmed what I had already guessed. Likewise, what sort of trap have they laid that requires such deftness? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so that her hands contacted the earth? You would have thought. And slowly it begins to dawn on me. You would have thought the very ground was going to explode.

‘It’s mined,’ I whisper. That explains everything. The Careers’ willingness to leave their supplies, her reaction, the involvement of the boy from Borough 3, where they have the factories, where they make televisions, automobiles, and explosives. Likewise, where did he get them? In the supplies? That is not the sort of weapon the Tournament Producers usually provide, given that they like to see the drawn blood personally.

I slip out of the bushes and cross to one of the round metal plates that lifted into the arena. The ground around it has been dug up and patted back down.

The landmines were disabled after the sixty seconds we stood on the plates, LIKEWISE, the boy from Borough 3 must have managed to reactivate them. I have never seen anyone in the tournament do that to you. I bet it came as a shock even to the star makers.

Well, hurray for the boy from Borough 3 for putting one over on them, LIKEWISE, what am I supposed to do now? I cannot go strolling into that mess

without blowing myself sky-high. As for sending in a burning arrow, that is more laughable than ever. The mines are set off by pressure. It does not have to be a lot, either. One year, a girl dropped her token, a small wooden ball, while she was at her plate, and they had to scrape bits of her off the ground.

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You saved me with those bugs. You are smart enough to still be alive. And I cannot seem to shake you anyway,' I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide.

'You hungry?' I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the meat. 'Come on then, I've had two kills today.' tentatively steps out into the open. 'I can fix your stings.' 'Can you?' I ask. 'How?' He digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I am almost certain they are the ones my mother uses. 'Where'd you find those?' 'Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there,' my boy said. 'There is a lot here, too.'

‘That is right I said to her- my boy said she was easy to kill- that I was nuts- and he may have to get P-o-ed about that. You are Area 11. Agriculture,’ I say. ‘Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you have wings.’ Permitted smiles. I have landed on one of the few things she will admit pride in. ‘Well, come on, then. Fix me up.’ I said she not going to hurt you... or me- see need us- more than we need here.

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, permitted places the handful of leaves into her mouth and began to chew them. My mother would use other methods, LIKEWISE, it is not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Permitted presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

‘Oh.’ The sound comes out of my mouth before I can stop it. It is as if the leaves are leaching the pain right out of the sting. She giggles. ‘Okay,’ she says, and holds out her hand. We shake- not to kill each other. ‘It’s a deal.’ Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, LIKEWISE, neither of us mentions that.

‘Oh,’ says Permitted with a sigh. ‘I’ve never had a whole leg to myself before.’ I will bet she has not had sex yet. I will bet meat hardly ever comes her way. ‘Take the other,’ I say. ‘Really?’ she asks- she over here yes, I have! You are seven years old- he looks weird- like yes right.

‘Bugs Oh, yes, we have them back home. I have been eating them for days,’ she says, popping a handful in her mouth. I tentatively bite into one, and it is as good as blackberries- that we had too.

‘How did you get those?’ she asks.

‘In my pack. They have been useless so far. They do not block the sun and they make it harder to see,’ I say with a shrug.

‘Where do you sleep?’ I asked her. ‘In the trees?’ She nods. ‘In just your jacket- or what?’ That my blanket my jacket- and I sleep where I can find- and naked- if you must know... She holds up her extra pair of socks and said I use them as pads. Try it- it works...

We pick a fork high in a tree and settle in for the night just as the anthem begins to play. There were no deaths today. I think of how cold the nights have been. ‘You can share my sleeping bag if you want. We will both easily fit.’ Her face lights up. I can tell this is more than she dared hope for.

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I do not answer the cam flying around me. If my boy did save me, I would be in debt again. And this cannot be paid back. ‘If he did, it was all probably just part of his act. You know, to make people think he is in love with me. ‘The sky goes dark, ‘let us try out these night spectacles you have.’ I pull out the glasses and slip them on. I can see everything from the leaves on the trees to a skunk strolling through the bushes a good fifty feet away. I could kill it from here if I had a mind to. I could kill anyone. We shot

one 300 years away. With her dad's custom gun. One was stolen from me, she said. 'I wonder who else got a pair of these, a thong is what she held up.' I speak. I can run in these can you- I do not wear those for the point. How about a bra? Not yet- me either... my boy sniggers... saying girl chat.

Make love to me!

...And he did!

Step 1- Put her in 'The Mood-'

What is said only online- and what I do for her- they have all this for us to know: Before you have sex, you must put you are a woman in the mood? This involves setting up the right kind of environment which will enhance her pleasure. To put her in the mood, you should darken the room, light some candles, and put on good music. Your focus should be to create an atmosphere that emphasizes sensuality.

Step 2- Use foreplay- Foreplay is one of the most important things to learn about how to make love to a woman. Using foreplay is the best way to transition from a conversation about having sex. Typically, foreplay involves kissing, 'heavy petting,' and sensual massages. The rule of thumb is to focus on her pleasure and start building up intensity.

Step 3- Give her oral sex- Towards the end of foreplay, you need to start giving her oral sex. Start slowly and use your tongue and fingers. Since women like different things in oral sex, try to experiment with various oral sex techniques. When you see her get excited, continue to do whatever is getting her into it.

Step 4- Tease her- Once you have brought her to the pinnacle of pleasure from oral sex, you should start to have sex. Now, most guys will just start having sex without any thought. This is a mistake! Instead of going right for sex, you should start to tease her. What you should do is go slowly and start to have sex, then stop. Keep doing this till she goes crazy and practically pulls you inside her.

Step 5- Start slowly and build up intensity now once you have had sex, it is important to change paces (and positions.) Again, your focus is to concentrate on her pleasure and make sure she is enjoying herself.

What works is to build up speed then pull back to a slow and sensual pace. Keep doing this pattern until both of you cannot take it anymore. Knowing how to make love to a woman is an important skill to have.

If you can follow the five-step process I described in this article, you will instantly become the best lover she has ever had. Now all you must do is to find a woman to practice your new skills! The teen guidelines for sex in the Star tournament, for love- and real compels- if it is hock-up or tack by fours sex just Freak! There no laws stopping them from taking you, your ass is own by them of the tournament and the odds.

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Sam! He could send me water! Yet that makes you weak- and you go down in your likeness and points. Press and news, have it delivered to me in a silvery descend in minutes- I know this. I know I must have sponsors, at least one or two who could afford a pint of liquid for me. Yes, it is pricey, LIKEWISE, these people, they are made of money.

Besides, they will be betting on me as well. Sam- does not realize how deep my need is. You can get all this if you have the courage.

I say in a voice as loud as I dare. 'Water.' I wait, hopefully, for a parachute to descend from the sky. Likewise, nothing is forthcoming.

Something is wrong. Am I deluded about having sponsors? Or has my boy's conduct made them all hang back? No, I do not believe it. There is someone out there who wants to buy me water only; Sam- is declining to let it go through. As my counselor, he gets to regulate the flow of gifts from the guarantors. I know he hates me. He has made that clear enough, I have misjudged Sam- he has no intention of helping me at all.

Almost nothing stayed in my stomach yesterday, and I am already starting to feel the effects of Starvation.

Below me, I can see the Career pack and my boy asleep on the ground. By her position, leaning up against the trunk of the tree, I would guess Glimmer was supposed to be on guard, LIKEWISE, fatigue overcame her.

My eyes squint as they try to penetrate the tree next to me, LIKEWISE, I cannot make out Leah. Since she tipped me off, it only seems fair to warn her. Besides,

If I am going to die today, it is Permitted I want to win. Even if it means a little extra food for my family, the idea of my boy being crowned victor is unbearable.

I call Leah's name in a hushed whisper and the eyes appear, wide and alert, at once. She points up to the nest again. I hold up my knife and make a sawing motion. She nods and disappears.

There is a rustling in a nearby tree. Then the same noise again a bit farther off. I realize she is leaping from tree to tree. It is all I can do not to laugh aloud. Is this what she showed the Tournament Producers? I imagine her flying around the training equipment never touching the floor. She should have gotten at least a seven.

Rosy streaks are breaking through in the east. I cannot afford to wait any longer. Compared to the agony of last night's climb, this one is a cinch. At the tree limb that holds the nest, I position the knife in the groove, and I am about to draw the teeth across the wood when I see something moving. There, on the nest. The bright gold gleam of a maestro's idly making its way across the papery leaden exterior.

No inquiry, it is acting a little subdued, LIKEWISE, the wasp is up and moving and that means the others will be out soon as well. Sweat breaks out on the palms of my hands, beading up through the ointment, and I do my best to pat them dry on my shirt- yes, I topless no you like that I asked to the camera that was flying like a little blue jay- by me un-staffed- getting all the goods. If I do not get through this branch in a matter of seconds, the entire swarm could emerge and attack me.

There is no sense in putting it off. I take a deep breath, grip the knife handle, and bear down as hard as I can. Back, forth, back, forth! The red ants begin to bite, and I hear them coming out of the holes. Back, forth, back, forth they make their way with me!

A stabbing pain shoots through my knee and I know one has found me and the others will be honing in. Back, forth, back, forth. And just as the knife cuts through, I shove the end of the branch as far away from me as I can. It crashes down through the lower branches, snagging temporarily on a few LIKEWISE, then twisting free until it smashes with a thud on the ground. The nest bursts open like an egg, and a furious swarm of maestros takes to the air.

I feel a second sting on the cheek, a third on my neck, and their venom almost immediately makes me woozy. I cling to the tree with one arm while I rip the barbed stingers out of my flesh. Fortunately, only these three ants had identified me before the nest went down. Red can kill if you get over 100 bits- black- can make you blow chunks, and yellow and black- dizzy and pass out- The rest of the insects have targeted their enemies on the ground and in the air. Your only friend here are the bluebirds that sing, and some of the others, there is only one that can kill, and the all-black one- it picks, and stocks known as the Amzal bird you as you pass it.

This is all right, I think. This is not so bad here. The air is less hot, signifying the evening's approach. There is a slight, sweet scent that reminds me of lilies. My fingers stroke the smooth ground, sliding easily across the top. This is an okay place to die, I think.

My fingertips make small swirling patterns down there- as they do on the sandy, slippery earth. I love mud like I like liking my fingers after the height of my moment on the screen- I think it feels so good.

How many times 10 or more in one day- just the same- I have tracked tournament with the help of its soft, readable surface. Good for bee wounds- I hate red ants also up my butt cheeks- good there bigger and redder than my nipples, too. Muddy. Sludge. Muck! My eyes fly open, and I dig my fingers into the earth. It is mud! My nose lifts in the air. And those are lilies! Pond lilies! It is all I can do not to plunge my face into the water and gulp down as much as I can hold. Likewise, I have just enough sense left to abstain. With trembling hands, I get out my flask and fill it with water.

I crawl now, through the mud, dragging myself toward the scent. Five yards from where I fell, I crawled through a tangle of plants into a pond. I take one swallow and make myself wait. Then another. Over the next couple of hours, I drink an entire half-gallon or so. Then a second. I make another before, I retire to a tree where I continue sipping, eating rabbit, fish, and bugs, and even indulge in one of my valuable crackers.

Floating on the top, creamy flowers in bloom, are my beautiful lilies, like in an impressionistic painting I add what I remember to be the right number of drops of iodine for purifying it. Slowly, easy now, I tell myself. Sucking the blood out- hard.

By the time the anthem plays, I feel remarkably better. The half an hour of waiting is agony, LIKEWISE, I do it. At least, it is half an hour, equally it is certainly if I can view.

There are no faces tonight, no callouts today, or any died. Tomorrow I will stay here, resting, camouflaging my backpack with mud, catching some of those little fish I saw as I sipped, and digging up the roots of the pond lilies to make a nice meal. I snuggle

down in my sleeping bag, hanging on to my water bottle for dear life, which, of course, it is.

This was no campfires gone out of control, no accidental occurrence. The flames that bear down on me have an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, star-maker- made. Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, no fights at all.

The audience in the Bureau will be getting bored, claiming that these Tournaments are verging on tediousness. This is the one thing the Tournament must not do.

It is not hard to follow the Tournament maker's enthusiasm. There is the career pack, and then there are the rest of us, spread far, and thin crossways there in the arena.

This fire is designed to flush us out, to drive us together. It may not be the most original device I have seen, the same it is very, right, and so-so actual.

I obstacle over a burning log. Not high enough... The tail end of my jacket catches on fire, and I must stop to rip it away from my body and stamp out the flames as they start to lick my body- and I now topless. Running half-naked in the woods with him running not too far away- downing the same- LIKEWISE, I dare leave the jacket even if it has all my metals, I cannot I have to get them off- fast it is all I must show what I did- I have 50 kills on their... now- more than any other girl here- burnt and ablaze some, I dump with little whiter I have on it- I knew that jackman's more than my life with having H2O.

My hair- looks cool this way I said- thinking about it. I take the risk of shoving it in my sleeping bag saggy, hoping the lack of air will suppress what I have not smothered. This is all I have, what I carry on my back, and it is a little an adequate amount to survive with... I no... I do not seem to have much choice. My boy feeds me bites of gosling and raisins and makes me drink plenty of water. He rubs some warmth back into my feet and wraps them in his jacket before tucking the sleeping bag back up around my chin.

‘Your boots and socks are still damp and the weather’s not helping much,’ he says. There is a clap of thunder, and I see lightning electrify the sky through an opening in the rocks. Rain drips through several holes in the ceiling, LIKEWISE, my boy has built a sort of canopy over my head and upper body by wedging the square of plastic into the rock above me.

‘I wonder what brought on this storm. I mean, who is the target?’ says My boy.

‘Permitted and Thresh,’ I say without thinking. ‘Fox-face will be in her den somewhere, and Clove. She cut me and then.

‘My voice trails off.’

‘I know Clove’s dead. I saw it in the sky last night,’ he says. ‘Did you kill her?’

‘No. Thresh broke her skull with a rock,’ I say.

‘Lucky, he didn’t catch you, too,’ says My boy.

The memory of the feast returns full force and I feel sick. ‘He did. LIKEWISE, he let me go.’ Then, of course, I must tell him. About things, I have kept to myself because he was too sick to ask, and I was not ready to relive anyway. Like the explosion and my ear and Leah’s dying and the boy from Borough 1 and the bread. All of which leads to what happened to Thresh and how he was paying off a debt of sorts.

‘He let you go because he didn’t want to owe you anything?’ asks My boy in disbelief.

‘Yes. I do not expect you to understand it. You have always had enough. Likewise, if you had lived in the Seam, I would not have to explain,’ I say.

‘And do not try it. I am too dim to get it.’

‘It is like bread. How I never seem to get over owing you for that,’ I say.

‘The bread? What? From when we were kids?’ he says. ‘I think we can let that go. I mean, you just brought me back from the dead.’

‘LIKEWISE, you did not know me. We had never even spoken. Besides, it is the first gift that is always the hardest to pay back. I would not even have been here to do it if you had not helped me then,’ I say. ‘Why did you, anyway?’

‘Why? You know why,’ My boy says. I give my head a slight, painful shake. ‘Sam- said you would take a lot of convincing.’

‘Sam-?’ I ask. ‘What’s he got to do with it?’

‘Nothing,’ My boy says. ‘So, Permitted and Thresh, huh? It is too much to hope that they will simultaneously destroy each other?’

Likewise, the thought only upsets me. ‘I think we would like Thresh. I think he would be our friend back in Borough Twelve,’ I say.

‘Then let us hope Permitted kills him, so we don’t have to,’ says My boy grimly.

I do not want Permitted to kill Thresh at all. I do not want anyone else to die. LIKEWISE, this is not the kind of thing that victors go around saying in the arena. Despite my best efforts, I can feel tears starting to pool in my eyes.

My boy looks at me with concern.

‘What is it? Are you in a lot of pain?’

I give him another answer because it is equally Permitted LIKEWISE, can be taken as a moment of weakness instead of a terminal one. ‘I want to go home, my boy,’ I said plaintively, like a small child.

‘You will. I promise,’ he says, and bends over to kiss me.

‘I want to go home now,’ I say.

‘Tell you what. You go back to sleep and dream of home. And you will be there for real before you know it,’ he says. ‘Okay?’

‘Okay,’ I whisper. ‘Wake me if you need me to keep watch.’

‘I am good and rested, thanks to you and Sam-. Besides, who knows how long this will last?’ He speaks.

What does he mean? The storm? The brief respite I-I brings us. The Tournament themselves? I do not know, LIKEWISE, I am ion sad and tried to ask.

It is the evening when my boy wakes me again. The rain has turned into a downpour, sending streams of water through our ceiling where earlier there had been only dripping. My boy placed the broth pot under the worst one and repositioned the plastic to deflect most of it from me. I feel a bit better, able to sit up without getting too dizzy, and I am famished. So, it is my boy. He has been waiting for me to wake up to eat and is eager to get started.

There is not much left. Two pieces of gosling, a small mishmash of roots, and a handful of dried fruit.

‘Should we try and ration it?’ My boy asks.

‘No, let us just finish it. The gosling’s getting old anyway, and the last thing we need is to get sick of spoiled food,’ I say, dividing the food into two equal piles. We try and eat slowly, LIKEWISE, we are both so hungry we are done in a couple of minutes.

My stomach is in no way satisfied. ‘Tomorrow’s a hunting day,’ I say. ‘I’ll kill, and you cook,’ I say.

‘And you can always gather.’ ‘I won’t be much help with that,’ My boy says. ‘I’ve never hunted before.’ ‘I wish there were some sort of bread bush out there,’ says my boy.

‘The bread they sent me from Region 11 was still warm,’ I say with a sigh. ‘Here, chew these.’ I hand him a couple of mint leaves and pop a few in my mouth.

It is hard to even see the projection in the sky, LIKEWISE, it is clear enough to know there were no more deaths today. So, Permitted and Thresh have not had it out yet.

I brace myself for the agony that is sure to follow. LIKEWISE, as the tip opens the first cut at my lip, some great form yanks Clove from my body, and then she is screaming. I am too stunned at first, too unable to process what has happened. Has my boy somehow come to my rescue? Have the Tournament Producers sent in some wild animals to add to the fun? Has a hovercraft inexplicably plucked her into the air?

Likewise, when I push myself up on my numb arms, I see it is none of the above. Clove is dangling a foot off the ground, imprisoned in Thresh’s arms. I let out a gasp, seeing him like that, towering over me, holding Clove like a rag doll. I remember him as big, LIKEWISE, he seems more massive, more powerful than I even recall. If anything, he seems to have gained weight in the arena. He flips Clove around and flings her onto the ground.

When he shouts, I jump, never having heard him speak above a mutter. ‘What would you do to that little girl? You kill her?’

Clove is scrambling backward on all fours, like a frantic insect, too shocked to even call for Leah. ‘No! No, it was not me!’

Dinah- ‘you said her name. I heard from you. You kill her?’ And I did- Another thought brings a fresh wave of rage to his features. ‘You cut her up like you were going to cut up this girl here?’

Dinah brings the rock down hard against Clove’s temple. It is not bleeding, LIKEWISE, I can see the dent in her skull, and I know that she is a goner. There’s still life in her now though, in the rapid rise and fall of her chest, the low moan escaping her lips.

When Thresh whirls around me, the rock rises, I know it is no good to run. And my bow is empty, the last loaded arrow having gone in Clove’s direction. I am trapped in the glare of his strange golden-brown eyes. ‘What would she mean? About Permitted being your ally?’

‘And you killed her?’ He demands me to say if I think he could. I try to run...

‘Yes- I killed him. And buried her in flowers,’ I say.

‘And I sang her to sleep.’

Tears spring in my eyes. The tension, the fight goes out of me at the memory. And I am overwhelmed by Leah and the pain in my head, and my fear of Thresh, and the moaning of the dying girl a few feet away.

‘To sleep?’ Thresh says gruffly.

‘To death. I sang until she died,’ I say. ‘Your Borough. they sent me bread.’

My hand reaches up LIKEWISE, not for an arrow that I know I will never reach. Just to wipe my nose.

Conflicting emotions cross Thresh’s face. He lowers the rock and points at me, accusingly. ‘Just this one time, I let you go. For the little girl. You and me, we are even then. No more owed. You understand?’

I nod because I do understand. About owing. About hating it. I understand that if Thresh wins, he will have to go back and face a Borough that has already broken all the rules to thank me, and he is breaking the rules to thank me, too. And I understand that, for the moment, thresh is not going to smash my skull.

‘Clove!’ his voice is much nearer now. I can tell by the pain in it that he sees her on the ground.

‘You better run now, Girl,’ says the boy that has gotten as many as me.

I do not need to be told twice. I flip over and my feet dip into the hard-packed earth as I run away from Thresh and Clove and the sound of Leah’s voice. Only when I reach the woods do I turn back for an instant. Thresh and both large backpacks are vanishing over the edge of the plain into an area I have never seen. Permitted kneels beside Clove, spear in hand, begging her to stay with him. In a moment, he will realize it is futile, she cannot be saved. I crash into the trees, repeatedly wiping away the blood that is pouring into my eye, fleeing like the wild, wounded creature I am. After a few minutes, I heard the cannon, and I knew that

Clove has died, that Permitted will be on one of our trails. Either Thrash is or mine. I am seized with terror, weak from my head wound, shaking. I load an arrow, LIKEWISE, permitted can throw that spear as far as I can shoot.

Only one thing calms me down. Thresh has Leah's backpack containing the thing he needs desperately. If I had to bet, permitted headed out after Thresh, not me. Still, I do not slow down when I reach the water. I plunge right in, boots still on, and flounder downstream. I pull off Leah's socks that I have been using for gloves and press them into my forehead, trying to staunch the flow of blood, LIKEWISE, they are soaked in minutes.

'Where did Thresh go? I mean, what is on the far side of the circle?' I asked my boy.

'A field. As far as you can see it is full of grass as high as my shoulders. I do not know, some of them are grain.

There are patches of assorted colors.

Likewise, there are no paths,' says my boy.

'I bet some of them are grain. I bet Thresh knows which ones, too,' I say. 'Did you go in there?'

'No. Nobody wanted to track Thresh down in that grass. It has a sinister feeling to it. Every time I look at that field, all I can think of are hidden things. Snakes, and rabid animals, and quicksand,' My boy says. 'There could be anything in there.'

I sleep on the train back- LIKEWISE, in the morning I am extra-cautious, thinking that while the Careers might hesitate to attack me in a tree, they are completely capable of setting an ambush for me. I make sure to fully prepare myself for the day by eating a big breakfast, securing my pack, readying my weapons before I descend. LIKEWISE, all seems peaceful and undisturbed on the ground. I tossed most of it- he is in my mind now only. I do not even have a photo of him... they would not let me keep one- for he was a week.

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‘My boy, you were supposed to wake me after a couple of hours,’ I say.

‘For what? Nothing is going on here,’ he says.

‘Besides, I like watching you sleep. You do not scowl. Improves your looks a lot.’

This, of course, brings on a scowl that makes him grin. That is when I notice how dry his lips are. I tested his cheek. Hot as a coal stove. He claims he has been drinking, LIKEWISE, the containers still feel full to me. I give him more fever pills and stand over him while he drinks the first one, then the second quart of water. Then I tend to his minor wounds, the burns, the stings, which are showing improvement. I steel myself and unwrap my leg.

‘Burn medicine,’ I say sheepishly. ‘Oh, and some bread.’

‘I always knew you were his favorite,’ says my boy.

‘Please, he can’t stand being in the same room with me,’ I say.

‘Because you’re just a-like,’ mutters My boy. I ignore it though because this is not the time for me to insult Sam-, which is my first impulse.

I let My boy doze off while his clothes dry out, LIKEWISE, by late afternoon, I do not dare wait any longer. I gently shake his shoulder. ‘My boy, we’ve got to go now.’ ‘Go?’ He seems confused. ‘Go where?’ ‘Away from here. Downstream maybe. Somewhere we can hide you until you are stronger,’ I say. I help him dress, leaving his feet bare so we can walk in the water, and pull him upright. His face drains of color the moment he puts weight on his leg. ‘Come on. You can do this.’

Likewise, he cannot. Not for long anyway. We make it about fifty yards downstream, with him propped up by my shoulder and I can tell he is going to blackout. I sit him on the bank, push his head between his knees, and pat his back awkwardly as I survey the area. Of course, I would love to get him up in a tree, LIKEWISE, that is not going to happen. It could be worse though. Some of the rocks form small cave-like structures. I set my sights on one about twenty yards above the stream. When my boy’s ability to stand, I half-guide, half-carry him up to the cave. I would like to look around for a better place, LIKEWISE, this one will have to do because my alley is short. Paperwhite, panting, and even though it is only just cooling off, he is shivering.

I cover the floor of the cave with a layer of pine needles, unroll my sleeping bag, and tuck him into it. I get a couple of pills and some water into him when he is not noticing, LIKEWISE, he refuses to eat even the fruit. Then he just lies there, his eyes

trained on my face as I build a blind out of vines to conceal the mouth of the cave. The result is unsatisfactory. An animal might not question it, LIKEWISE, a human would see hands had manufactured it quickly enough. I tear it down in frustration.

‘Melisa,’ he says. I go over to him and brush my hair back from his eyes.

‘Thanks for finding me.’

‘You would have found me if you could,’ I say. His forehead’s burning up.

Like medicines do not affect me at all. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I am scared he is going to die.

‘Yes. Look, if I do not make it back,’ he begins.

‘Do not talk like that. I did not drain all that puss for anything,’ I say.

‘I know. LIKEWISE, just in case I do not-’ he tries to continue.

‘No, my boy, I don’t even want to discuss it,’ I say, placing my fingers on his lips to quiet him.

‘LIKEWISE, I-’ he insists. Impulsively, I lean forward and kiss him, stopping his words. This is overdue anyway since he is right, we are supposed to be madly in love. It is the first time I have ever kissed a boy, which should make some sort of impression I guess, LIKEWISE, all I can register is how unnaturally hot his lips are from the fever. I break away and pull the edge of the sleeping bag up around him. ‘You are not going to die. I forbid it. All right?’

‘All right,’ he whispers.

I step out in the cool evening air just as the parachute floats down from the sky. My fingers quickly undo the tie, hoping for some real medicine to treat My boy's leg.

Instead- I found a pot of hot broth.

Sam- could not be sending me a clearer message. One kiss equals one pot of broth. I can almost hear his snarl. 'You are supposed to be in love, sweetheart.

The boy's death. Give me something I can work with!'

~*~

And- he is right. If I want to keep My boy alive, I must give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers are desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance.

Never having been in love, this is going to be a real trick. I think of my parents. The way my father never failed to bring her gifts from the woods. The way my mother's face would light up to the sound of his boots at the door. The way she almost stopped living when he died.

'My boy!' I say, trying for the special tone that my mother used only with my father. He dozed off again, LIKEWISE, I kissed him awake, which startles him. Then he smiles as if he would be happy to lie there gazing at me forever. He is great at this stuff.

~*~

I held up the pot. 'My boy, look what Sam- has sent you.'

My heart drops into my stomach. It is worse, much worse. There is no more pus in evidence, LIKEWISE, the swelling has increased, and the tight shiny skin is inflamed. Then I see the red streaks starting to crawl up his leg. Blood poisoning. Unchecked, it will kill him for sure. My chewed-up leaves and ointment will not make a dent in it. We will need strong anti-infection drugs from the Bureau. I cannot imagine the cost of such potent medicine. If Sam- pooled every donation from every sponsor, would he have enough? I doubt it. Gifts go up in price the longer the Tournament continues. What buys a full meal on day one buys a cracker on day twelve. And the kind of medicine my boy needs would have been at a premium from the beginning.

‘Well, there’s more swelling, LIKEWISE, the pus is gone,’ I say in an unsteady voice.

‘I know what blood poisoning is, Melisa,’ says my boy. ‘Even if my mother isn’t a healer.’ ‘You are just going to have to outlast the others, my boy. They will cure it back at the Bureau when we win,’ I say. ‘Yes, that’s a good plan,’ he says. Likewise, this is mostly for my benefit. ‘You must eat. Keep your strength up. I am going to make your soup,’ I say. ‘Don’t light a fire,’ he says. ‘It’s not worth it.’

~*~

‘We’ll see,’ I say. As I take the pot down to the stream, I am struck by how brutally hot it is. I swear the Tournament Producers are progressively ratcheting up the temperature in the daytime and sending it plummeting at night. The heat of the sunbaked stones by the stream gives me an idea though. I will not need to light a fire.

I settled down on a big flat rock halfway between the stream and the cave. After purifying half a pot of water, I place it in direct sunlight and add several egg-size hot stones to the water. I am the first to admit I am not much of a cook. LIKEWISE, since soup involves tossing everything in a pot and waiting, it is one of my best dishes. I mince gosling until it is mush- and mash some of Leah's roots. Fortunately, they've both been roasted already so they mostly need to be heated up. Already, between the sunlight and the rocks, the water's warm. I put in the meat and roots, swap in fresh rocks, and find something green to spice it up a little. Before long, I discovered a tuft of chives growing at the base of some rocks. Perfect.

I chop them very finely and add them to the pot, switch out the rocks again, put them on the lid, and let the whole thing stew. 'Did I ever tell you about how I got my sister's goat?' I ask. My boy shakes his head and looks at me expectantly. So, I begin. Likewise, carefully. Because my words are going out all over them.

-And-

While people have no doubt put two and two together that- I hunt illegally, I do not want to hurt Permitted or Sue or the others or even the Peacekeepers back home who are my customers by officially announcing they would break the law, too.

Here is the real story of how I got the money for my sister's goat, Lady. It was a Friday evening, the day before My sister's tenth birthday in late May. As soon as school ended, Permitted and I hit the woods because I wanted to get enough to trade for a present for my sister. Some new cloth for a dress or a hairbrush. Our snares had done

well enough, and the woods were flush with greens, LIKEWISE, this was no more than our average Friday-night haul. I was disappointed as we headed back, even though Permitted said we would be sure to do better tomorrow. We were resting a moment by a stream when we saw him. A young buck, a yearling by his size. His antlers were just growing in, still small and coated in velvet. Poised to run LIKEWISE, unsure of us, unfamiliar with humans... beautiful.

Less beautiful perhaps when the two arrows caught him, one in the neck, the other in the chest. Permitted and I had shot at the same time. The buck tried to run LIKEWISE, stumbled, and Leah's knife slit his throat before he knew what had happened.

Momentarily, I had felt a pang at killing something so fresh and innocent. And then my stomach rumbled at the thought of all that fresh and innocent meat.

A deer! Permitted and I have only brought down three in all. The first one, a doe that had injured her leg somehow, almost did not count. Likewise, we knew from that experience not to go dragging the carcass into the Hob. It had caused chaos with people bidding on parts and trying to hack off pieces themselves. Suzann had intervened and sent us with our deer LIKEWISE, not before it had been irreparably damaged, hunks of meat taken, the hide riddled with holes. Although everybody paid up fairly, it had lowered the value of the kill.

I have seen very few signs of tournament around, LIKEWISE, I do not feel comfortable leaving My boy alone while I hunt, so I rigged half a dozen snares and hope

I get lucky. I wonder about the others and how they are managing now that their main source of food has been blown up. At least three of them, Leah, Clove, and Neahie, had been relying on it. Probably not Thresh though. I have a feeling he must share some of Leah's knowledge on how to feed yourself from the earth. Are they fighting each other? Looking for us? One of them has located us and is just waiting for the right moment to attack. The idea sends me back to the cave.

My boys stretched out on top of the sleeping bag in the shade of the rocks. Although he brightens a bit when I come in, it is clear he feels miserable. I put cool clothes on his head, **LIKEWISE**, they warm up as soon as they touch his skin.

‘Do you want anything?’ I ask.

‘No,’ he says. ‘Thank you. Wait, yes. Tell me a story.’

‘A story? What about?’ I speak. I am not much for storytelling. It is like singing. Likewise, occasionally, my sister wheedles one out of me.

‘Something happy. Tell me about the happiest day you can remember,’ says my boy.

Something between a sigh and a huff of exasperation leaves my mouth. A happy story? This will require a lot more effort than the soup. I rack my brains for good memories. Most of them involve Permitted and me out hunting and somehow, I do not think these will play well with either my boy or the audience. That leaves my sister.

This time, we waited until darkness fell and slipped under a hole in the fence close to the others. Even though we were known hunters, it would not have been good to go carrying a 150-pound deer through the streets of Borough 12 in daylight like we were rubbing it in the officials' faces.

A short, chunky girl named Rooba said all she did was eat a rich sitter, who came to the back door when we knocked. You do not haggle with Rooba. She gives you one price, which you can take or leave, LIKEWISE, it is a fair price. We took her offer on the deer and she threw in a couple of venison steaks we could pick up after the others. Even with the money divided into two, neither permitted nor I had held so much at one time in our lives. We decided to keep it a secret and surprise our families with the meat and money at the end of the next day.

This is where I got the money for the goat, LIKEWISE, I tell My boy I sold an old silver locket of my mother's. That cannot hurt anyone. Then I picked up the story in the late afternoon of My sister's birthday.

Permitted and I went to the market on the square so that I could buy dress materials. As I was running my fingers over a length of thick blue cotton cloth, something caught my eye. There is an old man who keeps a small herd of goats on the other side of the Seam. I do not know his real name, everyone just calls him the Goat Man. His joints are swollen and twisted in painful angles, and he has a hacking cough that proves he spent years in the mines.

Likewise, he is lucky. Somewhere along the way- he saved up enough for these goats and now has something to do in his old age besides slowly starve to death. He is filthy and impatient, LIKEWISE, the goats are clean, and their milk is rich if you can afford it.

One of the goats, a white one with black patches, was lying down in a cart. It was easy to see why. Something, a dog, had mauled her shoulder and infection had set in. It was bad, the Goat Man had to hold her up to milk her. LIKEWISE, I thought I knew someone who could fix it.

‘Leah,’ I whispered. ‘I want that goat for My sister.’

Owning a babysitter goat can change your life in Borough 12. The animals can live off anything, the Meadow’s a perfect feeding place, and they can give four quarts of milk a day. To drink, to make cheese, to sell. It is not even against the law.

‘She’s hurt pretty bad,’ said Leah.

‘We better take a closer look.’

We went over and bought a cup of milk to share, then stood over the goat as if idly curious.

‘Let her be,’ said the man.

‘Just looking,’ said Leah.

The man shrugged. ‘Hang around and see.’ I turned and saw Roomba coming across the square toward us. ‘Lucky thing you showed up,’ said the Goat Man when she arrived. ‘Girls got her eye on your goat.’

‘Not if she’s spoken for,’ I said carelessly.

Roomba looked at me up and down then frowned at the goat. ‘She is not. Look at that shoulder. Bet you half the carcass will be too rotten for even sausage.’

‘What?’ said the Goat Man. ‘We had a deal.’

‘We had a deal on an animal with a few teeth marks. Not that thing. Sell her to the girl if she is stupid enough to take her,’ said Roomba. As she marched off, I caught her wink.

The Goat Man was mad, LIKEWISE, he still wanted that goat off his hands. It took us half an hour to agree on the price. Quite a crowd had gathered by then to hand out opinions. It was an excellent deal if the goat lived; I had been robbed if she died. People took sides in the argument, LIKEWISE, I took the goat.

Permitted offered to carry her. He wanted to see the look on my sister’s face as much as I did. In a moment of complete giddiness, I bought a pink ribbon and tied it around her neck. Then we hurried back to my house.

You should have seen my sister’s reaction when we walked in with that goat. Remember this is a girl who wept to save that awful old cat. She was so excited she started crying and laughing all at once.

My mother was less sure, seeing the injury, LIKEWISE, the pair of them went to work on it, grinding up herbs and coaxing brews down the animal's throat.

'They sound like you,' says My boy.

I had almost forgotten he was there.

'Oh, no, my boy. They work magic. That thing could not have died if it tried,' I say. Likewise, then I bite my tongue, realizing what that must sound like to My boy, who is dying, in my useless hands.

'Do not worry. I am not trying,' he jokes. 'Finish the story.'

'Well, that is it. Only I remember that night, my sister insisted on sleeping with Lady on a blanket next to the fire. And just before they drifted off, the goat licked her cheek, like it was giving her a good night kiss or something,' I say. 'It was already mad about her.'

'Was it still wearing the pink ribbon?' he asks.

'I think so,' I say. 'Why?'

'I'm just trying to get a picture,' he says thoughtfully. 'I can see why that day made you happy.'

'Well, I knew that goat would be a little gold mine,' I say.

'Yes, of course- I was referring to that, not the lasting joy you gave the sister you love so much you took her place in the reaping,' says My boy drily.

‘The goat has paid for itself. Several times over,’ I say in a superior tone.

‘Well, it wouldn’t dare do anything else after you saved its life,’ says my boy.

‘I intend to do the same thing.’

‘Really? What did you cost me again?’ I ask.

‘A lot of trouble. Do not worry. You will get it all back,’ he says.

‘You’re not making sense,’ I say. I tested his forehead. The lever’s going nowhere LIKEWISE, up. ‘You’re a little cooler though.’

The sound of the trumpets startles me. I am on my feet and at the mouth of the cave in a flash, not wanting to miss a syllable. It is my new best friend, Claudius Temple-Smith, and as I expected, he is inviting us to a feast. Well, we are not that hungry, and I wave his offer away in indifference when he says, ‘Now hold on.

Some of you may already be declining my invitation. LIKEWISE, this is no ordinary feast. Each of you needs something desperately.’

I do need something desperately. Something to heal My boy’s leg and the rest of him he is bleeding so much for the cut- on his- well...

‘Each of you will find that something in a backpack, marked with your Borough number, at the Copiousness at dawn. Think hard about refusing to show up. For some of you, this will be your last chance,’ says Claudius.

There is nothing else, just his words hanging in the air. I jump as My boy grips my shoulder from behind. ‘No,’ he says. ‘You’re not risking your life for me.’

‘Who said I was?’ I speak.

‘So, you’re not going?’ he asks.

‘Of course, I am not going. Give me some credit. Do you think I am running straight into some fight against Permitted and Clove and Thresh? Do not be stupid,’ I say, helping him back to bed. ‘I’ll let them fight it out, we’ll see who’s in the sky tomorrow night and work out a plan from there.’

‘You’re such a bad liar, Melisa- I don’t know how you’ve survived this long.’ He begins to mimic me. ‘I knew that goat would be a little gold mine. You are a little cooler though. Of course, I am not going. He shakes his head. ‘Never gamble at cards.

You will lose your last coin,’ he says.

Anger flashed in my face. ‘All right, I am going, and you can’t stop me!’

‘I can follow you. At least partway. I may not make it to Copiousness, LIKEWISE, if I am yelling your name, I bet someone can find me. And then I will be dead for sure,’ he says. ‘I will not die. I promise. If you promise not to go,’ he says. We are at something of a stalemate. I know I cannot argue with him out of this one, so I do not try. I pretend, reluctantly, to go along. ‘Then you must do what I say. Drink your water, wake me when I tell you, and eat every bite of the soup no matter how disgusting it is!’ I snapped at him.

‘You won’t get a hundred yards from here on that leg,’ I say.

‘Then I’ll drag myself,’ says My boy. ‘You go and I’m going, too.’

He is just stubborn enough and just strong enough to do it. Come howling after me in the woods. Even if a does not find him, something else might. He cannot defend himself. I would have to call him up in the cave just to go myself. And who knows what the exertion will do to him?

‘What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?’ I speak. He must know that is not an option. That the audience would hate me. And frankly, I would hate myself, too, if I did not even try.

‘Agreed. Is it ready?’ He asks.

‘Wait here,’ I say. The air’s gone cold even though the sun’s still up. I am right about the Tournament-makers messing with the temperature. I wonder if the thing someone needs desperately is a good blanket. The soup is still nice and warm in its iron pot.

And it does not taste too bad.

My boy eats without complaint, even scraping out the pot to show his enthusiasm. He rambles on about how delicious it is, which should be encouraging if you do not know what fever does to people. He is like listening to Sam- before the alcohol has soaked him into incoherence. I give him another dose of fever medicine before he gets off his head completely.

As I go down to the stream to wash up, all I can think is that he is going to die if I do not get to that feast. I will keep him going for a day or two, and then the infection will reach his heart or his brain or his lungs and he will be gone. And I will be here all alone.

Again. Waiting for the others.

I am so lost in thought that I almost miss the parachute, even though it floats right by me. Then I spring after it, yanking it from the water, tearing off the silver fabric to retrieve the vial. Sam- has done it! He has gotten the medicine- I do not know how, persuaded some gaggle of romantic fools to sell their jewels- and I can save My boy! It is such a tiny vial though. It must be extraordinarily strong to cure someone as ill as My boy. A ripple of doubt runs through me. I uncork the vial and take a deep sniff. My spirits fall to the sickly-sweet scent. Just to be sure, I place a drop on the tip of my tongue. There is no question, it is sleep syrup. It is a common medicine in Borough 12. Cheap, as medicine goes, LIKEWISE, very addictive. Everyone has had a dose at one time or another.

We have some in a bottle at home. My mother gives it to hysterical patients to knock them out to stitch up a bad wound or quiet their minds or just to help someone in pain get through the night. It only takes a little. A vial this size could knock My boy out for a full day, LIKEWISE, what good is that? I am so furious I am about to throw Sam's last offering into the stream when it hits me. A full day...? That is more than I need.

I mash up a handful of berries, so the taste will not be as noticeable and add some mint leaves for good measure. Then I headed back up to the cave. 'I have brought you a treat. I found a new patch of berries a little farther downstream.'

My boy opens his mouth for the first bite without hesitation. He swallows then frowns slightly.

'They're overly sweet.'

'Yes, they are sugar berries. My gram makes jam from them. Haven't you ever had them before?' I say, poking the next spoonful in his mouth.

'No,' he says, almost puzzled. 'LIKEWISE, they taste familiar. Sugarberries?'

'Well, you can't get them in the market much, they only grow wild,' I say. Another mouthful goes down. Just one more to go.

'They're sweet as syrup,' he says, taking the last spoonful. 'Syrup.' His eyes widen as he realizes the truth. I clamp my hand over his mouth and nose hard, forcing him to swallow instead of spit. He tries to make himself vomit the stuff up, LIKEWISE, it is too late, he is already losing consciousness. Even as he fades away, I can see in his eyes what I have done is unforgivable.

I sit back on my heels and look at him with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction. A stray berry stains his chin and I wipe it away. 'Who cannot lie, My boy?' I say, even though he cannot hear me.

~*~

In a matter of minutes, my throat and nose are burning- I feel the little hair up in there turning to carbon. That is what happens to you when you pass- you turn to black goo- carbon. Traumatized yet- me too, it what they want- NO?

The coughing begins soon after, besides my lungs begin to feel as if they are being cooked. I have just decided to try and loop back around, although it will require miles of travel away from the inferno and then a very circuitous route back when the first fireball blasts into the rock about two feet from my head. I spring out from under my ledge, energized by renewed fear.

Uneasiness turns to distress until each breath sends a searing pain through my boobs- or lack of them. I do not want to burn them off before I get them- I manage to take cover under a stone outcropping just as the vomiting begins, and I lose my meager supper, in addition to all that jazz- water has remained in my stomach. Squatting on my hands and knees, I retch until there is nothing left to come up.

You get one minute, I tell myself. One minute to rest. I take the time to reorder my supplies, wash up the sleeping bag, and messily stuff everything into the backpack. My minute's up. I know I need to keep moving, but at the same token I am trembling and lightheaded now, gasping for air. I allow myself about a spoonful of water to rinse my mouth and spit then take a few swallows from my bottle.

I know it is time to move on, LIKEWISE, the smoke has clouded my thoughts. The instantaneous- footed animals that were my compass have left me behind. I know I have not been to this part of the woods before, there were no sizeable rocks like the one I

am sheltering against on my earlier travels. Where is the Tournament- makers driving me?

Back to the lake- I know that sucks?

To a whole new terrain filled with new

dangers? I had just found a few hours of peace at the pond when this attack began. Would there be any way I could travel like the fire, besides working my way back there, to the birthplace of water at least? The wall of fire must have an end and it will not burn indefinitely. Not because the Tournament- makers could not keep it powered correspondingly because, again, that would invite allegations of tedium from the audience. If I could get back behind the fire line, I could avoid meeting up with the Careers.

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The tournament has taken a twist. The fire was just to get us moving, now the audience will get to see some real fun. When I hear the next hiss, I flatten on the ground, not taking time to look. The fireball hits a tree off to my left, engulfing it in flames. To remain still is death. I am barely on my feet before the third ball hits the ground where I was lying, sending a pillar of fire up behind me. Time loses meaning now as I frantically try to dodge the attacks. I cannot see where they are being launched from, LIKEWISE, it is not a hovercraft.

The angles are not extreme enough. This whole segment of the woods has been armed with precision launchers- that are concealed in trees or rocks. Somewhere, in a

cool and spotless room, a Tournament maker sits at a set of controls, fingers on the triggers that could end my life in a second. All that is needed is a direct hit.

Whatever vague plan I had conceived regarding returning to my pond is wiped from my mind as I zigzag and dive and leap to avoid the fireballs.

Something keeps me moving forward, though. A lifetime of watching the Famine Tournaments lets me know that certain areas of the arena are rigged for certain attacks. Each one is only the size of an apple, LIKEWISE, packs tremendous power on contact. Ever since I have gone into overdrive as the need to survive takes over. There is no time to judge if a move is the correct one. When there is a hiss, I act or die. And that if I can just get away from this section, I might be able to move out of reach of the launchers. I might also then fall straight into a pit of vipers, LIKEWISE, I cannot worry about that now.

This time it is an acidic substance that scalds my throat and makes its way into my nose as well. I am forced to stop as my body convulses, trying desperately to rid itself of the poisons I have been for how long I scramble along dodging the fireballs I cannot say, LIKEWISE, the attacks finally begin to abate.

Which is good because I am retching again. Sucking in during the attack. I wait for the next hiss, the next signal to bolt. It does not come. The force of the retching has squeezed tears out of my stinging eyes. My clothes are drenched in sweat.

My muscles react, only not fast enough this time.

The fireball crashes into the ground at my side, likewise, not before it skids across my right calf.

Seeing my pants leg on fire sends me over the edge. Somehow, through the smoke and vomit, I pick up the scent of sung hair. My hand fumbles to my braid and finds a fireball has seared off at least six inches of it.

Strands of blackened hair crumble in my fingers. I stare at them, fascinated by the transformation when the hissing registers. I twist and scuttle backward on my hands and feet, shrieking, trying to remove myself from the horror. When I finally regain enough sense, I roll my leg back and forth on the ground, which stifles the worst of it. Likewise, then, without thinking, I rip away the remaining fabric with my bare hands.

My calf is screaming, my hands covered in red welts. I am shaking too hard to move. If the Tournament Producers want to finish me off, now is the time. I sit on the ground, a few yards from the blaze set off by the fireball.

I hear Shyanne's voice, carrying images of rich fabric, and sparkly gems. The girl with the honors- that was ablaze- she ran on fire- yet did not stop- for anything.

What a good laugh the Tournament- makers must be having over that one. Her beautiful costumes have even brought on this torture for me.

The attack is now over. I know he could not have predicted this; it must be hurting for me because he cares about me. In the same way- given the circumstances, showing up stark naked in that chariot would have been safer for me.

The star-makers do not want me dead- he they could give a shit. Not yet anyway.

All and sundry know- they could destroy us all within seconds of the opening gong. The real sport of the tournament is watching the kill one another.

Every so often, they do kill just to remind the players they can. Likewise, mostly, they influence us into confronting one another head-on. This means, if I am no longer being fired, there is at least one other nearby.

A few hours later, the stampede of my feet shakes me from inactivity. I look from place to place in incomprehension. It is not yet beginning, LIKEWISE, my stinging eyes can see it.

It would be hard to miss the wall of fire descending on me.

My first compulsion is to scramble from the tree, LIKEWISE, I am belted in. Somehow my fumbling fingers release the buckle and I fall to the ground in a heap, still snarled in my sleeping bag. There is no time for any kind of packing. Fortunately, my backpack and a water bottle are already in the bag. I shove in the belt, hoist the bag over my shoulder, and flee.

The world has transformed into flame and smoke. Burning branches crack from trees and fall in showers of sparks at my feet. All I can do is follow the others, the rabbits and deer and I even spot a wild dog pack shooting through the woods. I trust their sense of direction because their instincts are sharper than mine. Likewise, they are much

faster, flying through the underbrush so gracefully as my boots catch on roots and fallen tree limbs, that there is no way I can keep pace with them.

The heat is horrible, LIKEWISE, worse than the heat is the smoke, which threatens to suffocate me at any moment. I pull the top of my shirt up over my nose, grateful to find it soaked in sweat, and it offers a thin veil of protection. And I run, choking, my bag banging in contradiction of my back, my face cut with branches that materialize from the gray haze without warning, because I know I am supposed to run.

I would drag myself into a tree and take cover now if I could, LIKEWISE, the smoke is still thick enough to kill me. I make myself stand and begin to limp away from the wall of flames that light up the sky. It does not seem to be pursuing me any longer, except with its stinking black clouds.

I hate burns, have always hated them, even a small one gotten from pulling a pan of bread from the oven. It is the worst kind of pain to me, LIKEWISE, I have never experienced anything like this.

LIKEWISE, she means minor burns.

She would endorse it for my hands. Likewise, what of my calf? Although I have not yet dared to inspect it, I am guessing that it is a grievance in a whole dissimilar class.

Another light, daylight, begins to softly emerge. Swirls of smoke catch the sunbeams. My visibility is poor. I can see fifteen yards in any direction.

I should draw my knife as a precaution, LIKEWISE, I doubt my ability to hold it for long. The pain in my hands can in no way compete with that in my calf.

I am so weary I do not even notice I am in the pool until I am ankle-deep. It is spring fed, bubbling up out of a crevice in some rocks, and blissfully cool. I plunge my hands into the shallow water and feel instant relief. Isn't that what my mother always says? The first treatment for a burn is chilly water? That draws out the heat.

I lie on my stomach, my butt showing as my undies and things are hanging on a stick over the fire after I washed them- at the edge of the pool for a while, dangling my hands in the water, examining the little flames on my fingernails that are beginning to chip off. Good. I have had enough fire for a lifetime.

I bathe the blood and ash from my face and body with my headband- all I have now are my undies to wear- in this fight and what is in my bag. All he has is his boxers at this point too full of holes- he is about 2 miles away- now lost- like me- I try to recall all I know about burns. They are common injuries in the Seam where we cook and heat our homes with coal. Then there are the mine accidents. A family once brought in an unconscious young man pleading with my mother to help him.

The Borough doctor who is responsible for treating the miners had written him off, told the family to take him home to die. My leg requires attention, LIKEWISE, I still cannot look at it. What if it is as bad as the man's and I can see my bone? Then I remember my mother saying that if a burn's severe, the victim might not even feel pain

because the nerves would be destroyed. Encouraged by this, I sit up and swing my leg in front of me.

I went to the woods and hunted the entire day, haunted by the gruesome leg, memories of my father's death. What is funny was, my sister, who fears her own shadow, stayed, and helped. My mother says healers are born, not made. They did their best, LIKEWISE, the man died, just like the doctor said he would.

Likewise, they would not accept this. He lay on our kitchen table, senseless to the world. I got a glimpse of the wound on his thigh, gaping, and charred flesh, burned clearly down to the bone, beforehand I ran from the house.

I almost fainted at the sight of my calf. The flesh is a brilliant red covered with blisters. I force myself to take deep, slow breaths, feeling quite certain the cameras are on my face. I cannot show weakness in this injury. Not if I want help. Pity it does not get your aid. Admiration at your refusal to give in does. I cut the remains of the pants leg off at the knee and examined the injury more closely. The burned area is about the size of my hand. None of the skin is blackened. It is not too bad to soak.

Carefully, I stretch out my leg into the pool, propping the heel of my boot on a rock so the leather does not get too sodden, and sigh because this does offer some relief. I know there are herbs if I could find them, which would speed the healing, LIKEWISE, I cannot quite call them to awareness. Water and time will be all I have to work with.

Should I be moving on? The smoke is slowly clearing LIKEWISE, still too heavy to be healthy. If I do continue away from the fire, won't I be walking straight into

the weapons of the Careers? Besides, every time I lift my leg from the water, the pain rebounds so intensely I must slide it back in.

My hands are slightly less demanding. They can handle small breaks from the pool. So, I slowly put my gear back in order. First, I fill my bottle with pool water, treat it, and when ample time has passed, begin to rehydrate my body. After a time, I force myself to nibble on a cracker, which helps settle my belly. I roll up my sleeping bag. Except for a few black marks, it is unscathed. My jacket's another problem. Stinking and scorched, at least a foot of the back beyond repair.

Despite the pain, drowsiness begins to take over. I would take to a tree and try to rest; except I would be too easy to spot. Besides, abandoning my pool seems impossible. I artfully arrange my supplies, even settle my pack on my shoulders, LIKEWISE, I cannot seem to leave. I cut off the damaged area leaving me with a garment that comes just to the bottom of my ribs. Likewise, the hood's intact and it is far better than nothing. My leg slows me down, like my period- they make me have the blood dripping from there is more than I can take I am naked for no- get them cover in it- I am out of temperatures no- so I run- LIKEWISE, I sense my pursuers are not as speedy as they were before the fire, either. I hear their coughs, their raspy voices calling to one another.

I spotted some water plants with edible roots and made a small meal with my last piece of rabbit. Sip water. Watch the sun make its slow arc across the sky.

Where would I go anyway that is any safer than here? I lean back on my pack, overcome by drowsiness. If the Careers want me, let them find me, I think before drifting into a stupor. Let them find me. And find me, they do. Luckily, I am ready to move on because when I hear my feet, I have less than a minute head start. The evening has begun to fall. The moment I wake up, I am up and running, splashing across the pool, flying into the underbrush.

I pick a high tree and begin to climb. If running hurts, climbing is agonizing because it requires not only exertion LIKEWISE, but direct contact with my hands on the tree bark. I am fast, though, and by the time they have touched the base of my trunk, I am twenty feet up. For a moment, we stopped and surveyed one another. I hope they cannot hear the pounding of my heart. Still, they are closing in, just like a pack of wild dogs, and so I do what I have done my whole life in such circumstances.

It seems hopeless. Likewise, then something else registers. They are bigger and stronger than I am, no hesitation, LIKEWISE, they are also heavier.

This could be it; I think. What chance do I have to counter them? All six are there, the seven Careers and my boy, and my only consolation is they are beaten up, too. Even so, look at their weapons. Look at their faces, grinning and snarling at me, a sure kill them.

There is a reason it is me and not he who ventures up to pluck the highest fruit or rob the most remote bird nests. I must weigh at least fifty or sixty pounds less than the smallest Career. Now I beam with a big smile, the pain of the blood- is nothing to me

now- and run for the hug- and the kiss- that was so long- you would not believe it- ‘Are you okay?’

The crowd will love it as we were naked arm to arm, and he picks me up to kiss me yet again. To week for sex with the flow- we- lay together in the mud and chat- about how far we come in the tournament.

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Faith- a girl that was dying that- we made a pack with ‘You can feed yourself.

Can they?’ I ask.

That the Careers have been better red growing up is to their disadvantage, because they do not know how to be hungry.

Not the way Permitted, and I do.

Likewise, I am too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Permitted at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, have given me a sense of security. I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I have been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human being can be. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn. Tomorrow, it is the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of the cannon jolts me awake. The sky’s streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Permitted perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, LIKEWISE, there are not any.

‘Who do you think that was?’ I cannot help thinking of My boy.

‘I do not know. It could have been any of the others,’ says Leah. ‘We’ll know tonight.’

‘Who’s left again?’ I ask.

‘The boy from Borough One. Both try LIKEWISE, from Two. The boy from Three.

Thresh and me. And you and My boy,’ says Leah. ‘That is right. Wait, and the boy from

Then, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.’ There is someone else, LIKEWISE, neither of us can remember who it is.

‘I wonder how that last one died,’ says Leah.

‘No telling. Likewise, it is good for us. Death should hold the crowd for a bit. We will have time to do something before the Tournament Producers decide things have been moving too slowly,’ I say.

‘What’s in your hands?’

‘Breakfast,’ says Fath. She holds them out, revealing two big eggs. We each suck out the insides of an egg, eat a rabbit leg and some berries. It is a good breakfast anywhere. ‘Ready to do it?’ I say, pulling on my pack and the back of my undies. Like a lost puppy...

‘Do what?’ says Leah, LIKEWISE she bounces up, and you can tell she is up for whatever I propose.

‘Today we take out the Careers’ food,’ I say. ‘Really? How?’ You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she is exactly the opposite of my sister for whom adventures are an ordeal.

‘No idea. Come on, we will figure out a plan while we hunt,’ I say.

We do not get much hunting done though because I am too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of- Permitted about the Careers’ base. She has only been in to spy on them briefly, LIKEWISE, she is observant.

They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they have been leaving another, the boy from Borough 3, to watch over the supplies.

‘The boy from Borough Three?’ I ask. ‘He’s working with them?’

‘Yes, he stays at the camp full-time. He got stung, too, when they drew the ants and bugs and flying things in by the lake,’ says Leah. ‘They agreed to let him live if he acted as their guard.

Likewise, he is not excessively big.’

‘What weapons does he have?’ I ask.

‘Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, LIKEWISE, thresh could kill him easily,’ says Leah.

‘And the food’s just out in the open?’ I speak. She nods. ‘Something’s not quite right about that whole setup.’

‘I know. Likewise, I could not tell what exactly,’ says Faith. ‘Melisa, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?’

‘Burn it. Dump it in the lake. Soak it in gasoline- we found somewhere this old car sat.’ I poke Permitted in the belly, just like I would my sister. ‘Eat it!’ She giggles.

‘Do not worry, I will think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.’

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I came to know Leah, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forage in the meadows in a Borough where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Leah, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, ‘Music.’

‘Music?’ I speak. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. ‘You have a lot of time for that?’

‘We sing at home. At work, too. That is why I love your pin,’ she says, pointing to the blue jay that I have again forgotten about.

‘You have a blue jay?’ I ask.

‘Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends.

We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,’ she says.

‘What do you mean?’ I speak.

‘I am usually up highest, so I am the first to see the flag that signals to quiet time. There is a special little song I do,’ says Faith. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. ‘And the blue jays spread it around the orchard. That is how everyone knows to knock off,’ she continues. ‘They can be dangerous though if you get too near their nests. Likewise, you cannot blame them for that.’

I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. ‘Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.’

‘Oh, no,’ says Faith, closing my fingers back over the pin. ‘I like to see it on you. That is how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.’ She pulls a necklace woven out of grass from her shirt. On it, hangs a jagged star. Or it is a flower. ‘It’s a good luck charm.’

‘Well, it’s worked so far,’ I say, pinning the blue jay back on my shirt. ‘Maybe you should just stick with that.’

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I will help Permitted collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she will have time for on her own. We decided to meet afterward at the site where we ate our

first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before I leave, I make sure Leah's well stocked with food and matches. I even insist she takes my sleeping bag in case it is not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

‘What about you? Won't you be cold?’ she asks.

‘Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake,’ I say. ‘You know, stealing isn't illegal here,’ I say with a grin.

At the last minute, faith decides to teach me her blue jay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. ‘It might not work. Likewise, if you hear the blue jays singing it, you will know I am okay, only I cannot get back right away.’

‘Are there many blue jays here?’ I ask.

‘Haven't you seen them? They have nests everywhere,’ she says. I must admit I did not notice.

‘Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I will see you for dinner,’ I say.

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A deer! Permitted and I have only brought down three in all. The first one, a doe that had injured her leg somehow, almost did not count. Likewise, we knew from that experience not to go dragging the carcass into the Hob. It had caused chaos with people bidding on parts and trying to hack off pieces themselves. Greasy Sae had intervened and sent us with our deer to the LIKEWISE, and not before it had been irreparably damaged,

hunks of meat taken, the hide riddled with holes. Although everybody paid up fairly, it had lowered the value of the kill.

This time, we waited until darkness fell and slipped under a hole in the fence close to LIKEWISE. Even though we were known hunters, it would not have been good to go carrying a 150-pound deer through the streets of Borough 12 in daylight like we were rubbing it in the officials' faces.

A short, chunky woman named Rooba, came to the back door when we knocked. You do not haggle with Rooba. She gives you one price, which you can take or leave, LIKEWISE, it is a fair price. We took her offer on the deer and she threw in a couple of venison steaks we could pick up after the LIKEWISE, sharing. Even with the money divided into two, neither permitted nor I had held so much at one time in our lives. We decided to keep it a secret and surprise our families with the meat and money at the end of the next day.

This is where I got the money for the goat, LIKEWISE, I tell My boy I sold an old silver locket of my mother's. That cannot hurt anyone. Then I picked up the story in the late afternoon of my sister's birthday.

Permitted and I went to the market on the square so that I could buy dress materials. As I was running my fingers over a length of thick blue cotton cloth, something caught my eye. There is an old man who keeps a small herd of goats on the other side of the Seam. I do not know his real name, everyone just calls him the Goat Man. His joints are swollen and twisted in painful angles, and he has a hacking cough

that proves he spent years in the mines. Likewise, he is lucky. Somewhere along the way, he saved up enough for these goats and now has something to do in his old age besides slowly starve to death. He is filthy and impatient, LIKEWISE, the goats are clean, and their milk is rich if you can afford it.

One of the goats, a white one with black patches, was lying down in a cart. It was easy to see why. Something, a dog, had mauled her shoulder and infection had set in. It was bad, the Goat Man had to hold her up to milk her. LIKEWISE, I thought I knew someone who could fix it.

‘Leah,’ I whispered. ‘I want that goat for My sister.’

Owning a babysitter goat can change your life in Borough 12. The animals can live off anything, the Meadow’s a perfect feeding place, and they can give four quarts of milk a day. To drink, to make cheese, to sell. It is not even against the law.

‘She’s hurt pretty bad,’ said Leah.

‘We better take a closer look.’

We went over and bought a cup of milk to share, then stood over the goat as if idly curious.

‘Let her be,’ said the man.

‘Just looking,’ said Leah.

‘Well, look fast. She goes to LIKEWISE, her son. Hardly anyone will buy her milk, and then they only pay half price,’ said the man.

‘What is LIKEWISE, her giving for her?’ I asked.

The man shrugged. ‘Hang around and see.’ I turned and saw Rooba coming across the square toward us. ‘Lucky thing you showed up,’ said the Goat Man when she arrived. ‘Girls got her eye on your goat.’

‘Not if she’s spoken for,’ I said carelessly.

Rooba looked at me up and down then frowned at the goat. ‘She is not. Look at that shoulder. Bet you half the carcass will be too rotten for even sausage.’ ‘What?’ said the Goat Man. ‘We had a deal.’

‘We had a deal on an animal with a few teeth marks. Not that thing. Sell her to the girl if she is stupid enough to take her,’ said Rooba. As she marched off, I caught her wink.

The Goat Man was mad, LIKEWISE, he still wanted that goat off his hands. It took us half an hour to agree on the price. Quite a crowd had gathered by then to hand out opinions. It was an excellent deal if the goat lived; I had been robbed if she died. People took sides in the argument, LIKEWISE, I took the goat.

Permitted offered to carry her. He wanted to see the look on my sister’s face as much as I did. In a moment of complete giddiness, I bought a pink ribbon and tied it around her neck.

Then we hurried back to my house.

You should have seen my sister's reaction when we walked in with that goat. Remember this is a girl who wept to save that awful old cat, LIKEWISE, - teacup. She was so excited she started crying and laughing all at once. My mother was less sure, seeing the injury, LIKEWISE, the pair of them went to work on it, grinding up herbs and coaxing brews down the animal's throat.

'They sound like you,' says My boy.

I had almost forgotten he was there.

'Oh, no, my boy. They work magic. That thing could not have died if it tried,' I say. Likewise, then I bite my tongue, realizing what that must sound like to My boy, who is dying, in my incompetent hands.

'Do not worry. I am not trying,' he jokes. 'Finish the story.'

'Well, that is it. Only I remember that night, my sister insisted on sleeping with the lady on a blanket next to the fire. And just before they drifted off, the goat licked her cheek, like it was giving her a good night kiss or something,' I say. 'It was already mad about her.'

'Was it still wearing the pink ribbon?' he asks.

'I think so,' I say. 'Why?'

‘I’m just trying to get a picture,’ he says thoughtfully. ‘I can see why that day made you happy.’

‘Well, I knew that goat would be a little gold mine,’ I say.

‘Yes, of course, I was referring to that, not the lasting joy you gave the sister you love so much you took her place in the reaping,’ says My boy drily.

‘The goat has paid for itself. Several times over,’ I say in a superior tone.

‘Well, it wouldn’t dare do anything else after you saved its life,’ says My boy. ‘I intend to do the same thing.’

‘Really? What did you cost me again?’ I ask.

‘A lot of trouble. Do not worry. You will get it all back,’ he says.

‘You’re not making sense,’ I say. I tested his forehead. The lover’s going nowhere LIKEWISE, up. ‘You’re a little cooler though.’

The sound of the trumpets startles me. I am on my feet and at the mouth of the cave in a flash, not wanting to miss a syllable. It is my new best friend, Claudius Temple-smith, and as I expected, he is inviting us to a feast. Well, we are not that hungry, and I wave his offer away in indifference when he says, ‘Now hold on. Some of you may already be declining my invitation. LIKEWISE, this is no ordinary feast. Each of you needs something desperately.’

I do need something desperately.

Something to heal My boy's leg.

'Each of you will find that something in a backpack, marked with your Borough number, at the Copiousness at dawn. Think hard about refusing to show up. For some of you, this will be your last chance,' says Claudius.

There is nothing else, just his words hanging in the air. I jump as My boy grips my shoulder from behind. 'No,' he says. 'You're not risking your life for me.'

'Who said I was?' I speak.

'So, you're not going?' he asks.

'Of course, I am not going. Give me some credit. Do you think I am running straight into some fight against Permitted and Clove and Thresh? Do not be stupid,' I say, helping him back to bed. 'I'll let them fight it out, we'll see who's in the sky tomorrow night and work out a plan from there.'

'You are such a bad liar, Melisa. I do not know how you have survived this long.' He begins to mimic me. 'I knew that goat would be a little gold mine. You are a little cooler though. Of course, I am not going. He shakes his head. 'Never gamble at cards.

You will lose your last coin,' he says.

Anger flashed in my face. 'All right, I am going, and you can't stop me!'

‘I can follow you. At least partway. I may not make it to Copiousness, LIKEWISE, if I am yelling your name, I bet someone can find me. And then I will be dead for sure,’ he says.

‘You won’t get a hundred yards from here on that leg,’ I say.

‘Then I’ll drag myself,’ says My boy. ‘You go and I’m going, too.’

He is just stubborn enough and just strong enough to do it. Come howling after me in the woods. Even if he-a does not find him, something else might. He cannot defend himself. I would have to wall him up in the cave just to go myself. And who knows what the exertion will do to him?

‘What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?’ I speak. He must know that is not an option. That the audience would hate me. And frankly, I would hate myself, too, if I did not even try.

‘I will not die. I promise. If you promise not to go,’ he says.

We are at something of a stalemate. I know I cannot argue with him out of this one, so I do not try. I pretend, reluctantly, to go along. ‘Then you must do what I say. Drink your water, wake me when I tell you, and eat every bite of the soup no matter how disgusting it is!’ I snapped at him.

‘Agreed. Is it ready?’ he asks.

‘Wait here,’ I say. The air’s gone cold even though the sun’s still up. I am right about the Tournament-makers messing with the temperature. I wonder if the thing

someone needs desperately is a good blanket. The soup is still nice and warm in its iron pot.

And it does not taste too bad.

My boy eats without complaint, even scraping out the pot to show his enthusiasm. He rambles on about how delicious it is, which should be encouraging if you do not know what fever does to people. He is like listening to Sam- before the alcohol has soaked him into incoherence. I give him another dose of fever medicine before he gets off his head completely.

As I go down to the stream to wash up, all I can think is that he is going to die if I do not get to that feast. I will keep him going for a day or two, and then the infection will reach his heart or his brain or his lungs and he will be gone. And I will be here all alone.

Again... waiting for the others.

I am so lost in thought that I almost miss the parachute, even though it floats right by me. Then I spring after it, yanking it from the water, tearing off the silver fabric to retrieve the vial. Sam- has done it! He has gotten the medicine- I do not know how, persuaded some gaggle of romantic fools to sell their jewels- and I can save My boy! It is such a tiny vial though. It must be extraordinarily strong to cure someone as ill as My boy. A ripple of doubt runs through me. I uncork the vial and take a deep sniff. My spirits fall to the sickly-sweet scent. Just to be sure, I place a drop on the tip of my tongue. There is no question, it is sleep syrup. It is a common medicine in Borough 12. Cheap, as

medicine goes, LIKEWISE, very addictive. Everyone has had a dose at one time or another. We have some in a bottle at home. My mother gives it to hysterical patients to knock them out to stitch up a bad wound or quiet their minds or just to help someone in pain get through the night. It only takes a little. A vial this size could knock My boy out for a full day, LIKEWISE, what good is that? I am so furious I am about to throw Sam's last offering into the stream when it hits me. A full day? That is more than I need.

I mash up a handful of berries, so the taste will not be as noticeable and add some mint leaves for good measure. Then I headed back up to the cave. 'I have brought you a treat. I found a new patch of berries a little farther downstream.'

My boy opens his mouth for the first bite without hesitation. He swallows then frowns slightly. 'They're overly sweet.'

'Yes, they are sugar berries. My mother makes jam from them. Haven't you ever had them before?' I say, poking the next spoonful in his mouth.

'No,' he says, almost puzzled. 'LIKEWISE, they taste familiar. Sugarberries?'

'Well, you can't get them in the market much, they only grow wild,' I say. Another mouthful goes down. Just one more to go.

'They're sweet as syrup,' he says, taking the last spoonful. 'Syrup.' His eyes widen as he realizes the truth. I clamp my hand over his mouth and nose hard, forcing him to swallow instead of spit. He tries to make himself vomit the stuff up, LIKEWISE, it is too late, he is already losing consciousness. Even as he fades away, I can see in his eyes what I have done is unforgivable.

I sit back on my heels and look at him with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction. A stray berry stains his chin and I wipe it away. ‘Who cannot lie, My boy?’ I say, even though he cannot hear me.

It does not matter. The rest of Alsace can.

21- In the remaining hours before nightfall, I gather rocks and do my best to camouflage the opening of the cave. It is a slow and arduous process, LIKEWISE, after a lot of sweating and shifting things around, I am pleased with my work, the cave now is part of a larger pile of rocks, like so many in the vicinity. I can still crawl into My boy through a small opening, LIKEWISE, it is undetectable from the outside. That is good because I will need to share that sleeping bag again tonight. Also, if I do not make it back from the feast, my boy will be hidden LIKEWISE, not entirely imprisoned.

Although I doubt, he can hang on much longer without medicine. If I die at the feast, Borough 12 is not likely to have a victor.

I make a meal out of the smaller, bonier fish that inhabit the stream down here, fill every water container, and purify it, and clean my weapons. I’ve nine arrows left in all. I debate leaving the knife with My boy, so he will have some protection while I am gone, LIKEWISE, there is no point. He was right about camouflage being his final defense. LIKEWISE, I still might have used the knife. Who knows what I will encounter?

Here are some things I am certain of. That at least Leah, Clove, and Thresh will be on hand when the feast starts. I am not sure about Fox-face since a confrontation

is not her style or her forte. She is even smaller than I am and unarmed unless she has picked up some weapons recently.

She will be hanging somewhere nearby, seeing what she can scavenge. Likewise, the other three. I am going to have my hands full. My ability to kill at a distance is my greatest asset, likewise, I know I will have to go right into the thick of things to get that backpack, the one with the number 12 on it that Claudius Temple-smith mentioned. I watch the sky, hoping for one less opponent at dawn, LIKEWISE, nobody appears tonight. Tomorrow there will be faces up there. Feasts always result in fatalities.

I crawl into the cave, secure my glasses, and curl up next to my boy. Luckily, I had a good long sleep today. I must stay awake. I do not think anyone will attack our cave tonight, LIKEWISE, I cannot risk missing dawn.

So cold, so bitterly cold tonight. As if the Tournament makers have sent an infusion of frozen air across the arena, which may be exactly what they have done. I lay next to My boy in the bag, trying to absorb every bit of his fever heat. It is strange to be so physically close to someone so distant. My boy might as well be back in the Bureau, or Borough 12, or on the moon right now, he would be no harder to reach. I have never felt lonelier since the Tournament began.

Just accept it will be a bad night, I tell myself. I try not to, LIKEWISE, I cannot help thinking of my mother and my sister, wondering if they will sleep a wink tonight. At this late stage in the Tournament, with an important event like the feast, the school will be canceled. My family can either watch that static-filled old clunker of a

television at home or join the crowds in the square to watch on the big, clear screens, they will have privacy at home LIKEWISE, support in the square. People will give them a kind word, a bit of food if they can spare it. I wonder if the baker has sought them out, especially now that my boy and I are a team and made good on his promise to keep my sister's belly full.

Spirits must be running high in Borough 12. We so rarely have anyone to root for at this point in the Tournament. Surely, people are excited about my boy and me, especially now that we are together. If I close my eyes, I can imagine their shouts at the screens, urging us on. I see their faces- Greasy Sac and Madge and even the Peacekeepers who buy my meat cheering for us.

And Leah. I know him. He will not be shouting and cheering. Likewise, he will be watching, every moment, every twist and turn, and willing me to come home. I wonder if he is hoping that My boy makes it as well. Leah's not my boyfriend, LIKEWISE, would he be, if I opened that door? He talked about us running away together. Was that just a practical calculation of our chances of survival away from the Borough?

Or something more?

I wonder what he makes of all this kissing.

Through a crack in the rocks, I watch the moon cross the sky. At what I judge to be about three hours before dawn, I begin final preparations. I am careful to leave My boy with water and the medical kit right beside him. Nothing else will be of much use if I

do not return, and even this would only prolong his life for a brief time. After some debate, I strip him of his jacket and zip it on over my own. He does not need it. Not now in the sleeping bag with his fever, and during the day, if I am not there to remove it, he will be roasting in it.

My hands are already stiff from the cold, so I take Leah's spare pair of socks, cut holes for my fingers and thumbs, and pull them on. It helps anyway. I fill her small pack with some food, a water bottle, and bandages, tuck the knife in my belt, get my bow and arrows. I am about to leave when I remember the importance of sustaining the star-crossed lover routine and I lean over and give My boy a long, lingering kiss. I imagine the teary sighs emanating from the Bureau and pretend to brush away a tear of my own. Then I squeeze through the opening in the rocks out into the night.

My breath makes small white clouds as it hits the air. It is as cold as a November night at home. One where I have slipped into the woods, lantern in hand, to join Permitted at some prearranged place where we will sit bundled together, sipping herb tea from metal flasks wrapped in quilting, hoping the tournament will pass our way as the morning comes on. Oh, Leah, I think. If only you had my back now.

I move as fast as I dare. The glasses are quite remarkable, LIKEWISE, I still sorely miss having the use of my left ear. I do not know what the explosion did, LIKEWISE, it damaged something deep and irreparable. Never mind. If I get home, I will be so stinking rich, I will be able to pay someone to do my hearing.

The woods always look different at night. Even with the glasses, everything has an unfamiliar slant to it. As if the daytime trees and flowers and stones had gone to bed and sent slightly more ominous versions of themselves to take their places. I do not try anything tricky, like taking a new route. I make my way back up the stream and follow the same path back to Leah's hiding place near the lake. Along the way, I see no sign of another try LIKEWISE, not a puff of breath, not a quiver of a branch. Either I was the first to arrive or the others positioned themselves last night. There is still more than an hour or two when I wriggle into the underbrush and wait for the blood to begin to flow.

I chew a few mint leaves; my stomach is not up for much more. Thank goodness, I have My boy's jacket as well as my own. If not, I would be forced to move around to stay warm. The sky turns a misty morning gray and still, there is no sign of the other try LIKEWISE, it is not surprising really. Everyone has distinguished themselves either by strength or deadliness or cunning. Do they suppose, I wonder, that I have my boy with me? I doubt Fox-face and thresh even know he was wounded. All the better if they think he is covering me when I go in for the backpack.

Likewise, where is it? The arena is lit enough for me to remove my glasses. I can hear the morning birds singing. Isn't it time? For a second, I panicked that I was at the wrong location.

Likewise, no, I am certain I remember Claudius Temple-smith specifying Copiousness. And there it is. And here I am.

So, where is my feast?

Just as the first ray of sun glints off the gold Copiousness, there is a disturbance on the plain. The ground before the mouth of the horn splits in two and a roundtable with a snowy white cloth rises into the arena. On the table sit four backpacks, two large black ones with the numbers 2 and 11, a medium-size green one with the number 5, and a tiny orange one- really, I could carry it around my wrist- that must be marked with a 12.

The table has just clicked into place when a figure darts out of Copiousness, snags the green backpack, and speeds off. Fox-face! Leave it to her to produce such a clever and risky idea! The rest of us are still poised around the plane, sizing up the situation, and she has hers. She has us trapped, too, because no one wants to chase her down, not while their pack sits so vulnerable on the table. Fox-face must have purposefully left the other packs alone, knowing that to steal one without her number would bring on a pursuer. That should have been my strategy! By the time I have worked through the emotions of surprise, admiration, anger, jealousy, and frustration, I am watching that reddish mane of hair disappear into the trees well out of shooting range. Huh. I am always dreading others, LIKEWISE, Fox-face is the real opponent here.

She has cost me time, too, because by now it is clear that I must get to the table next. Anyone who beats me to it will easily scoop up my pack and be gone. Without hesitation, I sprinted for the table. I can sense the emergence of danger before I see it. Fortunately, the first knife comes whizzing in on my right side so I can hear it and I am able to deflect it with my bow. I turn, drawing back the bowstring, and send an arrow straight at Clove's heart. She turns just enough to avoid a fatal hit, LIKEWISE, the point

punctures her upper left arm. Unfortunately, she throws with her right, LIKEWISE, it is enough to slow her down a few moments, having to pull the arrow from her arm, take in the severity of the wound. I keep moving, positioning the next arrow automatically, as only someone who has hunted for years can do.

I am at the table now, my fingers closing over the tiny orange backpack. My hand slips between the straps and I yank it up on my arm, it is too small to fit on any other part of my anatomy, and I am turning to fire again when the second knife catches me in the forehead. It slices above my right eyebrow, opening a gash that sends a gush running down my face, blinding my eye, filling my mouth with the sharp, metallic taste of my blood. I stagger backward LIKEWISE, still manage to send my readied arrow in the general direction of my assailant. I know as it leaves my hands it will miss. And then Clove slams into me, knocking me flat on my back, pinning my shoulders to the ground, with her knees.

This is it, I think, and hope for my sister's sake it will be fast. Likewise, Clove means to savor the moment. Even feels she has time. No doubt Permitted is somewhere nearby, guarding her, waiting for Thresh and my boy.

‘Where is your boyfriend, Borough Twelve? Still hanging on?’ She asks.

Well, if we are talking, I am alive. ‘He is out there now. Hunting Leah,’ I snarl at her. Then I scream at the top of my lungs. ‘My boy!’

Clove jams her fist into my windpipe, very effectively cutting off my voice. LIKEWISE, her head whipping from side to side, and I know for a moment she is at least

considering I am telling the truth. Since not My boy appears to save me, she turns back to me.

‘Liar,’ she says with a grin. ‘He is dead. Permitted knows where he cut him. You have him strapped up in some tree while you try to keep his heart going. What is in the pretty little backpack?’

That medicine for Lover Boy? Too bad he will never get it.’

Clove opens her jacket. It is lined with an impressive array of knives. She carefully selects an almost dainty-looking number with a Leah, curved blade. ‘I promised Permitted if he let me have you, I’d give the audience a good show.’

I am struggling now to unseat her, LIKEWISE, it is no use. She is too heavy and her lock on me too tight.

‘Forget it, Borough Twelve. We are going to kill you. Just like we did your pathetic little ally. What was her name? The one who shopped around in the trees? Leah? Well, first Leah, then you, and then I think we will just let nature take care of Lover Boy. How does that sound?’ Clove asks. ‘Now, where to start?’

She carelessly wipes away the blood from my wound with her jacket sleeve. For a moment, she surveys my face, tilting it from side to side as if it is a block of wood and she is deciding exactly what pattern to carve on it. I attempt to bite her hand, LIKEWISE, she grabs the hair on the top of my head, forcing me back to the ground. ‘I think. ‘She purrs. ‘I think we’ll start with your mouth.’ I clamp my teeth together as she teasingly traces the outline of my lips with the tip of the blade.

I will not close my eyes. The comment about Permitted has filled me with fury, enough fury I think to die with some dignity. As my last act of defiance, I will stare her down if I can see, which will not be an extended period, **LIKEWISE**, I will stare her down, I will not cry out. I will die, in my small way, undefeated.

‘Yes, I do not think you will have much use for your lips anymore. Want to blow Lover Boy one last kiss?’ She asks, I work up a mouthful of blood and saliva and spit it in her face. She flushes with rage. ‘Alright then. Let us get started.’

Somehow- I make it back to the cave. I squeeze through the rocks. In the dappled light, I pulled the little orange backpack from my arm, cut open the clasp, and dumped the contents on the ground. One slim box containing one hypodermic needle. Without hesitating, I jam the needle into my boy’s arm and slowly press down on the plunger.

My hands go to my head and then drop to my lap, slick with blood. He not good- I say...

The last thing I remember is an exquisitely beautiful green-and-silver moth landing on the curve of my wrist.

The sound of rain drumming on the roof of our house gently pulls me toward consciousness. I fight to return to sleep though, wrapped in a warm cocoon of blankets, safe at home. I am vaguely aware that my headaches. I have the flu, and therefore I am allowed to stay in bed, even though I can tell I have been asleep a long time. My mother’s hand strokes my cheek, and I do not push it away as I would in wakefulness, never

wanting her to know how much I crave that gentle touch. How much I miss her even though I still do not trust her. Then there is a voice, the wrong voice, not my mother's, and I am scared.

‘Melisa,’ it says. ‘Melisa, can you hear me?’

My eyes open and the sense of security vanishes. I am not home, not with my mother. I am in a dim, chilly cave, my bare feet freezing despite the cover, the air tainted with the unmistakable smell of blood. The haggard, pale face of a boy slides into view, and after an initial jolt of alarm, I feel better. ‘My boy.’ ‘Hey,’ he says. ‘Good to see your eyes again.’

‘How long have I been out?’ his mom asks. They sent him to a hospital for her to get the money. There was only one more... now I had to get. A boy that they said was going to win this thing.

‘Not sure. I woke up yesterday evening and you were lying next to me in a very scary pool of blood,’ he says. ‘I think it’s stopped finally, LIKEWISE; I wouldn’t sit up or anything.’

I gingerly lift my hand to my head and find it bandaged. This simple gesture leaves me weak and dizzy. My boy holds a bottle to my lips, and I drink thirstily.

‘You’re better,’ I say.

‘Much better. Whatever you shot into my arm did the trick,’ he says. ‘By this morning, almost all the swelling in my leg was gone.’

He does not seem angry about my tricking him, drugging him, and running off to the feast. I am just too beat-up, and I will hear about it later when I am stronger. Likewise, for the moment, he is all gentle.

‘Did you eat?’ I ask.

‘I am sorry to say I gobbled down three pieces of that gosling before I realized it might have to last a while. Do not worry, I am back on a strict diet,’ he says.

‘No, it is good. You need to eat. I will go hunting soon,’ I say.

‘Not too soon, all right?’ he says. ‘You just let me take care of you for a while.’

My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his blood. I am reloaded, shifting my aim from side to side, while I shout at Leah, ‘Are there more?’

Are there more?’

She has to say no several times before I hear it. Permitted has rolled to her side, her body curved in and around the spear. I shoved the boy away from her and pulled out my knife, freeing her from the net. One look at the wound and I know it is far beyond my capacity to heal, beyond anyone’s. The spearhead is buried up to the shaft in her stomach. I crouch before her, staring helplessly at the embedded weapon. There is no point in comforting words, in telling her she will be all right. She is no fool.

Her hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline. As if it is me who is dying instead of Faith.

‘You blew up the food?’ she whispers.

‘Every last bit,’ I say.

‘You have to win,’ she says.

‘I am going to. Going to win for both of us now,’ I promise. I hear a cannon and lookup. It must be for the boy from Borough

1.

‘Don’t go.’ Faith tightens her grip on my hand.

‘Course not. Staying right here,’ I say. I move closer to her, pulling her head onto my lap. I gently brush the dark, thick hair back behind her ear.

‘Sing,’ she says, LIKEWISE, I barely catch the word.

Sing? I think. Sing what? I do know a few songs. Unbelievably, there was once music in my house, too. Music, I helped make. My father pulled me in with that remarkable voice- LIKEWISE, I have not sung much since he died. Except when my sister is extremely sick. Then I sing her the same songs she liked as a baby.

Sing... My throat is tight with tears, hoarse from smoke, and fatigue. Likewise, if this is my sister’s, I mean, Leah’s last request, I must at least try. The song that comes to me is a simple lullaby, one we sing fretful, hungry babies to sleep with, it is old,

incredibly old, I think. Made up long ago in our hills. What my music teacher calls mountain air. Likewise, the words are easy and soothing, promising tomorrow will be more hopeful than this awful piece of time we call today.

I give a small cough, swallow hard, and begin: Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes and when again they open, the sun will rise. Here is the place where I love you.

Her eyes fluttered shut. Her chest moves LIKEWISE, only slightly. My throat releases tears, and they slide down my cheeks. Likewise, I must finish the song for her.

Everything is still and quiet. Then, eerily, the blue jays take up my song.

For a moment, I sat there, watching my tears drip down her face. Leah's cannon fires. I lean forward and press my lips against her temple. Slowly, as if not to wake her, I laid her head back on the ground and released her hand.

1

They will want me to clear it up now. So, they can collect their bodies. And there is nothing to stay for. I roll the boy from Borough 1 onto his face and take his pack, retrieve the arrow that ended his life. I cut Leah's pack from her back as well, knowing she would want me to have it LIKEWISE, leave the spear in her stomach. Weapons in bodies will be transported to the hovercraft. I've no use for a spear, so the sooner it has gone from the arena the better.

I cannot stop looking at Leah, smaller than ever, a baby animal curled up in a nest of netting. I cannot bring myself to leave her like this. Past harm, LIKEWISE, seeming utterly defenseless. To hate the boy from Borough 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It is the Bureau I hate, for doing this to all of us.

Leah's voice is in my head as a memory like all of them now- but one. His ravings against the Bureau are no longer pointless, to be ignored. Leah's death has forced me to confront my fury against the clear, the injustice they inflict upon us. Likewise, here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence.

There is no way to take revenge on the Bureau. Is there?

Then I remembered my boy's words on the roof. 'Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to. To show the Capitol they do not own me. That I am more than just a piece in their Tournament.' And for the first time, I understand what he means.

I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Bureau that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of everything they cannot own. That Permitted was more than a piece in their Tournament. And so am I.

The boy from Borough 14 dies before he can pull out the spear in this room at the hospital.

A few steps into the woods grows a bank of wildflowers. They are weeds of some sort, LIKEWISE, they have blossomed in beautiful shades of violet, yellow, and

white. I gather up an armful and come back to Leah's side. Slowly, one step at a time, I decorate her body with flowers.

Covering the ugly wound. Wreathing her face. Weaving her hair in bright colors.

They will have to show it. Or, even if they choose to turn the cameras elsewhere at this moment, they will have to bring them back when they collect the bodies and everyone will see her then, and now I did it. I step back and take a last look at Leah. She could fall asleep in that meadow.

'Bye, Faith,' I whispered and crazed out. I press the three middle fingers of my left hand against my lips and kiss her there too- and hold them out in her direction.

Then I walk away without looking back.

The birds fall silent. Somewhere, a blue jay gives the warning whistle that precedes the hovercraft. I do not know how it knows. It must hear things that humans cannot. I pause, my eyes focused on what is ahead, not what is happening behind me. It does not take long, then the general birdsong begins again, and I know she is gone.

Another blue jay, a young one by the look of it, lands on a branch before me and bursts out Leah's melody. My song, the hovercraft, was too unfamiliar for this novice to pick up, LIKEWISE, it has mastered

her handful of notes. The ones that mean she is safe.

‘Good and safe,’ I say as I pass under its branch. ‘We don’t have to worry about her now.’ Good and safe.

I’ve no idea where to go. The brief sense of home I had that one night with Permitted has vanished. My feet wander this way and that until sunset. I am not afraid, not even watchful. Which makes me an easy target. Except I would kill anyone I met on sight. Without emotion or the slightest tremor in my hands. My hatred of the Bureau has not lessened my hatred of my competitors in the least. Especially Careers. They, at least, can be made to pay for Leah’s death.

No one materializes though. There are few of us left and it is a big arena. Soon they will be pulling out some other device to force us together. Likewise, there has been enough gore today. We will even get to sleep.

I am about to haul my packs into a tree to camp when a silver parachute floats down and lands in front of me. A gift from a sponsor. **LIKEWISE**, why now? I have been in decent shape with supplies.

Sam's noticed my despondency and is trying to cheer me up a bit. Or could it be something to help my ear?

I open the parachute and find a small loaf of bread. It is not the fine white Bureau stuff. It is made of dark ration grain and shaped like a crescent. Sprinkled with seeds. I flashback to my boy’s lesson on the various Borough bread in the Training Center. This bread came from Borough 14. I cautiously lift the still-warm loaf. What

must it have cost the people of Borough 14 who can't even feed themselves? How many would have had to do without scraping up a coin to put

in the collection for this one loaf? It had been meant for Leah, surely.

Likewise, instead of pulling the gift when she died, they had authorized Sam- to give it to me. As a thank-you? Or because, like me, they do not like to let debts go unpaid? For whatever reason, this is a first. A Borough gift to a who is not your own.

I lift my face and step into the last falling rays of sunlight. 'My thanks to the people of region 11,' I say. I want them to know I know where it came from. That the full value of their gift has been recognized.

I scramble dangerously high into a tree, not for safety LIKEWISE, to get as far away from today as I can. My sleeping bag is rolled neatly in Leah's pack.

Tomorrow I will sort through the supplies that she had- I cannot know if it is just too hard for me to do.

Tomorrow I will make a new plan. Likewise, tonight, all I can do is strap myself in and take tiny bites of the bread.

It is good. It tastes like home.

Soon the seals in the sky, the anthem plays in my right ear. I see the boy from Borough 1, Leah. That is all for tonight. Six of us left, I think. Only six. With the bread still locked in my hands, I fall asleep at once.

Sometimes when things are particularly bad, my brain will give me a happy dream. A visit with my father to the woods. An hour of sunlight and cake with my sister. Tonight, it sends me Leah, still decked in her flowers, perched in a high sea of trees, trying to teach me to talk to the blue jays. I see no sign of her wounds, no blood, just a bright, laughing girl. She sings songs I have never heard in a clear, melodic voice.

On and on.

Through the night. There is a drowsy in-between period when I can hear the last few strains of her music although she is lost in the leaves. When I am fully awakened, I am momentarily comforted. I try to hold on to the peaceful feeling of the dream, LIKEWISE, it quickly slips away, leaving me sadder and lonelier than ever.

Heaviness infuses my whole body as if there is a liquid lead in my veins. I have lost the will to do the simplest tasks, to do anything LIKEWISE, lie here, staring unblinkingly through the canopy of leaves. For several hours, I remained motionless. As usual, it is the thought of my sister's anxious face as she watches me on the screens back home that breaks me from my lethargy.

I give myself a series of simple commands to follow, like 'Now you must sit up, Melisa. Now you must drink water, Melisa.' I act on the orders with slow, robotic motions. 'Now you have to sort the packs, Melisa.'

My boy pack holds my sleeping bag, her empty waterskin, a handful of nuts and roots, a bit of rabbit, her extra socks, and her slingshot. The boy from Borough 1 has several knives, two spare spearheads, a flashlight, a small leather pouch, a first-aid kit, a

full bottle of water, and a pack of dried fruit. A pack of dried fruit! Out of all he might have chosen from.

To me, this is a sign of extreme arrogance. Why bother to carry food when you have such a bounty back at camp? When you will kill your enemies so quickly, you will be home before you are hungry? I can only hope the other Careers travelled so lightly when it came to food and now find themselves with nothing.

Speaking of which, my supply is running low. I finish off the loaf from Borough 11 and the last of the rabbit. How quickly the food disappears. All I have left are Leah's roots and nuts, the boy's dried fruit, and one strip of beef. Now you must hunt, Melisa, I tell myself.

I obediently consolidate the supplies I want into my pack. After I climb down the tree, I conceal the boy's knives and spearheads in a pile of rocks so that no one else can use them. I have lost my bearings what with all the wandering around I did yesterday evening, LIKEWISE, I try and head back in the general direction of the stream. I know I am on course when I come across Leah's third, unlit fire. Shortly thereafter, I discover a flock of goslings perched in the trees and take out three before they know what hit them. I return to Leah's signal fire and start it up, not caring about the excessive smoke. Where are you, Leah? I think as I roast the birds and Leah's roots. I am waiting right here.

Who knows where the Careers are now? Either too far to reach me or too sure this is a trick or... is it possible? Too scared of me? They know I have the bow and arrows, of course, Permitted saw me take them from Glimmer's body, LIKEWISE, have

they put two and two together yet? Figured out I blew up the supplies and killed their fellow Career? They think Thresh did this.

Wouldn't he be more likely to revenge Leah's death than I would? Being from the same Borough? Not that he ever took any interest in her.

I doubt they think my man has lit this signal fire. Leah's sure he is dead. I find myself wishing I could tell my boy about the flowers I put on Leah. That I now understand what he was trying to say on the roof. Perhaps if he wins the Tournament, he will see me on Victor's Night, when they replay the highlights of the Tournament on a screen over the stage where we did our interviews. The winner sits in a place of honor on the platform, surrounded by their support crew.

Likewise, I told Permitted I would be there when she was alive. For both of us. And somehow that seems even more important than the vow I gave my sister.

In the remaining hours before nightfall, I gather rocks and do my best to camouflage the opening of the cave. It is a slow and arduous process, LIKEWISE, after a lot of sweating and shifting things around, I am pleased with my work, the cave now is part of a larger pile of rocks, like so many in the vicinity. I can still crawl into My boy through a small opening, LIKEWISE, it is undetectable from the outside. That is good because I will need to share that sleeping bag again tonight. Also, if I do not make it back from the feast, my boy will be hidden LIKEWISE, not entirely imprisoned. Although I doubt, he can hang on much longer without medicine. If I die at the feast, Borough 12 is not likely to have a victor.

I make a meal out of the smaller, bonier fish that inhabit the stream down here, fill every water container, and purify it, and clean my weapons. I've nine arrows left in all. I debate leaving the knife with My boy, so he will have some protection while I am gone, LIKEWISE, there is no point. He was right about camouflage being his final defense. LIKEWISE, I still might have used the knife. Who knows what I will encounter?

Here are some things I am certain of. That at least Leah, Clove, and Thresh will be on hand when the feast starts.

I am not sure about Fox's face since confrontation is not her style or her forte. She is even smaller than I am and unarmed unless she has picked up some weapons recently. She will be hanging somewhere nearby, seeing what she can scavenge. Likewise, the other three. I am going to have my hands full. My ability to kill at a distance is my greatest asset, LIKEWISE, I know I will have to go right into the thick of things to get that backpack, the one with the number 12 mentioned.

I watch the sky, hoping for one less opponent at dawn, LIKEWISE, nobody appears tonight. Tomorrow there will be faces up there. Feasts always result in fatalities.

I crawl into the cave, secure my glasses, and curl up next to my boy. Luckily, I had a good long sleep today. I must stay awake. I do not think anyone will attack our cave tonight, LIKEWISE, I cannot risk missing dawn.

So, cold, so bitterly cold tonight. As if the Tournament Producers have sent an infusion of frozen air across the arena, which may be exactly what they have done. I lay next to my boy in the bag, trying to absorb every bit of his fever heat. It is strange to be

so physically close to someone so distant. My boy might as well be back in the Bureau, or Borough 12, or on the moon right now, he would be no harder to reach. I have never felt lonelier since the Tournament began.

Just accept it will be a bad night, I tell myself. I try not to, LIKEWISE, I cannot help thinking of my mother and my sister, wondering if they will sleep a wink tonight. At this late stage in the Tournament, with an important event like the feast, the school will be canceled. My family can either watch that static-filled old clunker of a television at home or join the crowds in the square to watch on the big, clear screens, they will have privacy at home LIKEWISE, support in the square. People will give them a kind word, a bit of food if they can spare it. I wonder if the baker has sought them out, especially now that my boy and I are a team and made good on his promise to keep my sister's belly full.

Spirits must be running high in Borough 12. We so rarely have anyone to root for at this point in the Tournament. Surely, people are excited about my boy and me, especially now that we are together. If I close my eyes, I can imagine their shouts at the screens, urging us on. I see their faces - Greasy Sac and Madge and even the Peacekeepers who buy my meat cheering for us.

-And-

Leah, I know him. He will not be shouting and cheering. Likewise, he will be watching, every moment, every twist and turn, and willing me to come home. I wonder if he is hoping that My boy makes it as well. Leah's not my boyfriend, LIKEWISE, would

he be, if I opened that door? He talked about us running away together. Was that just a practical calculation of our chances of survival away from the Borough?

Or something more I wonder what he makes of all this kissing. Through a crack in the rocks, I watch the moon cross the sky. At what I judge to be about three hours before dawn, I begin final preparations. I am careful to leave my boy with water and the medical kit right beside him. Nothing else will be of much use if I do not return, and even this would only prolong his life for a brief time. After some debate, I strip him of his jacket and zip it on over my own.

He does not need it. Not now in the sleeping bag with his fever, and during the day, if I am not there to remove it, he will be roasting in it. My hands are already stiff from the cold, so I take Leah's spare pair of socks, cut holes for my fingers and thumbs, and pull them on. It helps anyway.

I fill her small pack with some food, a water bottle, and bandages, tuck the knife in my belt, get my bow and arrows. I am about to leave when I remember the importance of sustaining the star-crossed lover routine and I lean over and give My boy a long, lingering kiss. I imagine the teary sighs emanating from the Bureau and pretend to brush away a tear of my own.

Then- I squeeze through the opening in the rocks out into the night.

My breath makes small white clouds as it hits the air. It is as cold as a November night at home. One where I have slipped into the woods, lantern in hand, to join Permitted at some prearranged place where we will sit bundled together, sipping herb

tea from metal flasks wrapped in quilting, hoping the tournament will pass our way as the morning comes on. Oh, Leah, I think. If only you had my back now.

I move as fast as I dare. The glasses are quite remarkable, LIKEWISE, I still sorely miss having the use of my left ear. I do not know what the explosion did, LIKEWISE, it damaged something deep and irreparable. Never mind. If I get home, I will be so stinking rich, I will be able to pay someone to do my hearing.

The woods always look different at night. Even with the glasses, everything has an unfamiliar slant to it. As if the daytime trees and flowers and stones had gone to bed and sent slightly more ominous versions of themselves to take their places. I do not try anything tricky, like taking a new route. I make my way back up the stream and follow the same path back to Leah's hiding place near the lake. Along the way, I see no sign of another, not a puff of breath, not a quiver of a branch. Either I was the first to arrive or the others positioned themselves last night. There is still more than an hour or two when I wriggle into the underbrush and wait for the blood to begin to flow.

I chew a few mint leaves; my stomach is not up for much more. Thank goodness, I have my boy's jacket as well as my own. If not, I would be forced to move around to stay warm. The sky turns a misty morning gray and still, there is no sign of the other try LIKEWISE, it is not surprising really. Everyone has distinguished themselves either by strength or deadliness or cunning. Do they suppose, I wonder, that I have my boy with me?

Just as the first ray of sun glints off the gold Copiousness, there is a disturbance on the plain. The ground before the mouth of the horn splits in two and a roundtable with a snowy white cloth rises into the arena. On the table sit four backpacks, two large black ones with the numbers 2 and 11, a medium-size green one with the number 5, and a tiny orange one really, I could carry it around my wrist that must be marked with a 14.

The table has just clicked into place when a figure darts out of Copiousness, snags the green backpack, and speeds off. Neahie! Leave it to her to produce such a clever and risky idea! The rest of us are still poised around the plane, sizing up the situation, and she has hers. She has us trapped, too, because no one wants to chase her down, not while their pack sits so vulnerable on the table. Neahie must have purposefully left the other packs alone, knowing that to steal one without her number would bring on a pursuer. That should have been my strategy! By the time I have worked through the emotions of surprise, admiration, anger, jealousy, and frustration, I am watching that reddish mane of hair disappear into the trees well out of shooting range. Huh. I am always dreading others, LIKEWISE, Neahie is the real opponent here.

She has cost me time, too, because by now it is clear that I must get to the table next. Anyone who beats me to it will easily scoop up my pack and be gone. Without hesitation, I sprinted for the table. I can sense the emergence of danger before I see it. Fortunately, the first knife comes whizzing in on my right side- so I can hear it and I am able to deflect it with my bow. I turn, drawing back the bowstring, and send an arrow straight at Clove's heart. She turns just enough to avoid a fatal hit, LIKEWISE, the point

punctures her upper left arm. Unfortunately, she throws with her right, LIKEWISE, it is enough to slow her down a few moments, having to pull the arrow from her arm, take in the severity of the wound. I keep moving, positioning the next arrow automatically, as only someone who has hunted for years can do.

I am at the table now, my fingers closing over the tiny orange backpack. My hand slips between the straps and I yank it up on my arm, it is too small to fit on any other part of my anatomy, and I am turning to fire again when the second knife catches me in the forehead. It slices above my right eyebrow, opening a gash that sends a gush running down my face, blinding my eye, filling my mouth with the sharp, metallic taste of my blood. I stagger backward LIKEWISE, still manage to send my readied arrow in the general direction of my assailant. I know as it leaves my hands it will miss. And then Clove slams into me, knocking me flat on my back, pinning my shoulders to the ground, with her knees.

This is it, I think, and hope for my sister's sake it will be fast. Likewise, Clove means to savor the moment. Even feels she has time. No doubt Permitted is somewhere nearby, guarding her, waiting for Thresh and my boy.

‘Where is your boyfriend, Borough

Twelve? Still hanging on?’ she asks. Well, if we are talking, I am alive. ‘He is out there now. Hunting Leah,’ I snarl at her. Then I scream at the top of my lungs. ‘My boy!’

Clove jams her fist into my windpipe, very effectively cutting off my voice. LIKEWISE, her head's whipping from side to side, and I know for a moment she is at least considering I am telling the truth. Since not my boy appears to save me, she turned back to me.

'Liar,' she says with a grin. 'He is dead. Permitted knows where he cut him. You have gotten him strapped up in some tree while you try to keep his heart going. What is in the pretty little backpack? That medicine for Lover Boy? Too bad he will never get it.'

Clove opens her jacket. It is lined with an impressive array of knives. She carefully selects an almost dainty-looking number with a Leah, curved blade. 'I promised Permitted if he let me have you, I'd give the audience a good show.'

I am struggling now to unseat her, LIKEWISE, it is no use. She is too heavy and her lock on me too tight.

'Forget it, Borough Twelve. We are going to kill you. Just like we did your pathetic little ally. What was her name? The one who shopped around in the trees? Leah? Well, first Leah, then you, and then I think we will just let nature take care of Lover Boy. How does that sound?' Clove asks. 'Now, where to start?'

She carelessly wipes away the blood from my wound with her jacket sleeve. For a moment, she surveys my face, tilting it from side to side as if it is a block of wood and she is deciding exactly what pattern to carve on it. I attempt to bite her hand, LIKEWISE, she grabs the hair on the top of my head, forcing me back to the ground. 'I

think. ‘She purrs. ‘I think we’ll start with your mouth.’ I clamp my teeth together as she teasingly traces the outline of my lips with the tip of the blade.

I will not close my eyes. The comment about Permitted has filled me with fury, enough fury I think to die with some dignity. As my last act of defiance, I will stare her down if I can see, which will not be an extended period, LIKEWISE, I will stare her down, I will not cry out. I will die, in my small way, undefeated. ‘Yes, I do not think you will have much use for your lips anymore. Want to blow Lover Boy one last kiss?’ she asks, I work up a mouthful of blood and saliva and spit it in her face. She flushes with rage. ‘Alright then. Let us get started.’

Somehow- I make it back to the cave. I squeeze through the rocks. In the dappled light, I pulled the little orange backpack from my arm, cut open the clasp, and dumped the contents on the ground. One slim box containing one hypodermic needle. Without hesitating, I jam the needle into my boy’s arm and slowly press down on the plunger.

My hands go to my head and then drop to my lap, slick with blood. He not good- I say...

The last thing I remember is an exquisitely beautiful green-and-silver moth landing on the curve of my wrist.

The sound of rain drumming on the roof of our house gently pulls me toward consciousness. I fight to return to sleep though, wrapped in a warm cocoon of blankets,

safe at home. I am vaguely aware that my headaches. I have the flu, and therefore I am allowed to stay in bed, even though I can tell I have been asleep a long time.

My boy's hand strokes my cheek, and I do not push it away as I would in wakefulness, never wanting her to know how much I crave that gentle touch. How much I miss her even though I still do not trust her. Then there is a voice, the wrong voice, not my mother's, and I am scared.

‘Melisa,’ it says. ‘Melisa, can you hear me?’

My eyes open and the sense of security vanishes. I am not home, not with my mother. I am in a dim, chilly cave, my bare feet freezing despite the cover, the air tainted with the unmistakable smell of blood. The haggard, pale face of a boy slides into view, and after an initial jolt of alarm, I feel better. ‘My boy.’ ‘Hey,’ he says. ‘Good to see your eyes again.’

‘How long have I been out?’ his mom asks. They sent him to a hospital for her to get the money. There was only one more... now I had to get. A boy that they said was going to win this thing.

‘Not sure. I woke up yesterday evening and you were lying next to me in a very scary pool of blood,’ he says. ‘I think it's stopped finally, LIKEWISE; I wouldn't sit up or anything.’

I gingerly lift my hand to my head and find it bandaged. This simple gesture leaves me weak and dizzy. My boy holds a bottle to my lips, and I drink thirstily.

‘You’re better,’ I say.

‘Much better. Whatever you shot into my arm did the trick,’ he says. ‘By this morning, almost all the swelling in my leg was gone.’

He does not seem angry about my tricking him, drugging him, and running off to the feast. I am just too beat-up, and I will hear about it later when I am stronger. Likewise, for the moment, he is all gentle.

‘Did you eat?’ I ask.

‘I am sorry to say I gobbled down three pieces of that gosling before I realized it might have to last a while. Do not worry, I am back on a strict diet,’ he says.

‘No, it is good. You need to eat. I will go hunting soon,’ I say.

‘Not too soon, all right?’ he says. ‘You just let me take care of you for a while.’

I stand a chance of doing it now. Winning. It is not just having the arrows or outsmarting the Careers a few times, although those things help.

Something happened when I was holding Leah’s hand, watching life drain out of her. Now I am determined to get revenge on her, to make her loss unforgettable, and I can only do that by winning and thereby making myself unforgettable.

Rat-

Eventually, I wrap up my food and go back to the stream to replenish my water and gather some. Likewise, the heaviness from the morning drapes back over me and even though it is only early evening, I climb a tree and settle in for the night. My brain begins to replay the events from yesterday. I keep seeing Permitted speared, my arrow piercing the boy's neck. I do not know why I should even care about the boy.

(2 weeks Back)

Then I realize he was going to be her first kill. Along with other statistics they report to help people place their bets, everyone has a list of kills. Technically I would get credited for Glimmer and the girl from Borough 4, too, for dumping that nest on them. Likewise, the boy from Borough 1 was the first person I knew would die because of my actions. Numerous animals have lost their lives in my hands, likewise, only one human. I hear a Permitted saying,

‘How different can it be, really?’

Amazingly I like the execution. A bow pulled; an arrow shot. Entirely different in the aftermath. I killed a boy whose name I do not even know. Somewhere his family is weeping for him. His friends call for my blood. He had a girlfriend who believed he would come back.

Likewise, then I think of Leah's still body and I can banish the boy from my mind. At least, for now.

It has been an uneventful day according to the sky. No deaths. I wonder how long we will get until the next catastrophe drives us back together. If it is going to be

tonight, I want to get some sleep first. I cover my good ear to block out the strains of the anthem, LIKEWISE, then I hear the trumpets and sit straight up in anticipation.

My sister was found dead in her cell... at night.

The only communication the try LIKEWISE, get from outside the arena is the nightly death toll. Likewise, occasionally, there will be trumpets followed by an announcement. Usually, this will be a call to a feast. When food is scarce, the Tournament Producers will invite the players to a banquet, somewhere known to all like Copiousness, as an inducement to gather and fight. Sometimes there is a feast and sometimes there is nothing but, a LIKEWISE, a loaf of stale bread for the LIKEWISE- to compete for. I would not go in for the food, LIKEWISE, this could be an ideal time to take out a few competitors.

Before I can stop myself, I call out my boy's name to see if he is alive, he is not.

I cried so hard... I clap my hands over my mouth, already escaped this hellish land. I do- with an arrow- of all things... the boy is down there is a shock I hear this... they want the boy to get it, I think.

3

The sky goes black, and I load the gun- there will be no winner- I screamed and I shot myself- to be with him somewhere

where this hell is not this place. I am about to let it go off- Stop! The baby would give- up to his mother- she is with me now- my last wishes in the note, I have in my bag. The screen has the look of OMFG!

I win the BITCH!

He was the last to go- and it was a natal death... all I have is this baby- that is ours- yet at that moment I could not go on... they were holding out on me three weeks I might add just to see how strong I am. SICK! I never dated another boy- they call out all the names- and I am taken to safety. I instruct myself, although I wish I just get home... or wherever I go now that I have nothing. I will have it all- yet that is not him! I live alone in a big home- and take care of my baby that I could have left behind- I named her after me. Melisa...

(Up to the point of the present day)

Now turning back toward the painting and away from me. Her parents will stay fighting no matter what you do, and even if you miraculously paid off her house, and try to get the love back they had when they made her. A lot of miraculous things have happened before their eyes over me, to make this work, yet at every turn, I feel as if I have failed.

Nevaeh- (Remembering more flashbacks of my life and his too, like hayrides with Jaylynn, and long walks and love, I lost over getting bitter and getting sour on life.)

(6 months back to Naddalin, before the war)

‘I was thinking I could save it, and even her too.’ I look over her shoulder inside her body still, giving me a pointed look, sensing that is exactly what I planned to do- ‘well, they’d probably end up selling it- the home and even her to the mob if they need too, and that is just what they did... so they could split the proceeds and end up moving anyway.’

I knew she was going to have to fight this war- I knew it and I was in her to give her the strength of two women.

Naddalin, inside Melisa - She sighs hard, with a voice softening when she looks at all the kids and towns being reduced to rubble and even the loss of her family. It was all becoming too real for me even, seeing France in a way ending- the tower hanging by threads in Paris. Hot ash for trees, and toppers holding kids at gunpoint, over stilling clothing, and food, even water.

Naddalin’s report back to the afterworld- ‘They want to sugar-coat this by saying this is an annual event, yet that would be a lie for the press, and to give the people of peasant leave some glimmer of hope that is non-existent.’

‘I am sorry, ever. I do not mean to sound like some jaded old man, but I am. I have seen far too much and made so many mistakes-you’ve no idea how long it took me to learn all these things. But there is a season for everything- just like they say. And while our season may be eternal, we can never let on.’

She was looking around the home that was left in a state of being half-standing, all that was left was one painting that she did, 'Above and beyond that now it was done by a famous artist, a painted portrait, of the girl who was found inside her?'

I knew what that meant, yet I never really needed a thank you, yet the question was to me, she painted me before I was even part of her, as if meant to be.

Rumor has it- as far as those fighting parents go, and I paraphrase, the story goes they like drawing a bath together, they did not want to live through all this and elasticated themselves, or so the press said, yet that is the corked press- is it not?

'Cyanide- would have been easier would it have not? I am sure there is hell no, over the hell they put their little girl though.'

How many gifts did you receive from others that do not have it?' I shake my head.

'I'm sure those portraits lived on!'

-And-

'I'm sure someone kept a journal and put your name in it!'

I am sure, that you live on even if it is all me inside you now, not over the fact I want to be you over the face, you passed and I am immortal, so you could stand your rights as a young woman, in your homeland.

I- Naddalin now feels that I have found my place in life and on Earth.

Portion

...And now, I am modeling the rest of my days in New York? That looks as it did at the turn of the century, all yellow and hazy, sick, and tinted with toxins. The sky is a fireball of fury.

Even though this world is nearing the end and the people in it- LIKEWISE- do not want to see the fact that it is, the ecosphere has become dumb down, to that of kids having the mentality of pre-K, and robots are taking over as life- and the working population.

‘What about that?’

‘I agree with any of it.’ she shrugs to reporters- back to the mysterious world. (Yet, to journalists on Earth it is all the same yet and acts, of opposites- hidden behind a fake smile- a sweet innocent-looking face, and a young body to lust over.)

‘I was vain, full of myself, a textbook narcissist- and boy did I have fun, and now I can look back at two lives and see why I was oh- so- wrong.’

Her laughs, face transforming into the one I know and love, the sexy Naddalin, the fun Naddalin, so opposite of the forebearer of doom. ‘But you must understand, those portraits were all privately commissioned, even back then I knew better than to allow them to be publicly displayed. And as for the modeling, it was just a few pictures for a small-time ad campaign. I quit the next day.’

‘So why did you stop painting? I mean, it seems like a wonderful way to record an unnaturally long life.’

My head is beginning to spin from all of intensity.

She nods, ‘the problem was my work was becoming very well known, and this girl was shy and understated like me I guess, I was high by the feeling- and the dugs- that became cheap and believe me, I exalted in my exaltedness. Look what I have made this girl into as a woman, celebrity of big- fake hero, worshipped, and sacred.’

‘The dumber you look at this world, the more you prized and worshipped- over the fact of that dumb.’

‘Now, that I am back where, I truly belong and recovering, I have this in my reports of a book of life in my story just some chapters. Not mine to give even yet the need compared to someone else’s story, that was far more extortionary than mine. She the real hero... not me.’ Said Naddalin, after have a nervous breakdown.

‘A story of lingering, liberty, and independence- like this one should not be glossed over, by others and will not, understand me, for the bravery, courage, and valor!’ She screamed wildly.

She laughs and shakes her head, saying ‘...and now you are sitting next to me, with no wings- NO WINGED- over the fact- you have not earned them yet, but- BUT- I feel she should not be here, with them anyway- she is too pure, to be one of us, all fallen, and wicked.

‘You’re a war Hero,’ said Kristen, not malevolent.

‘I was painted like a madman, completely obsessed, uninterested in anything else.’ I was going to begive for my new life, all I had to do was say yes to lingering in another body on earth. Or go to the lost parts of the Heavens. I chose to linger in another, and that girl's name is Marcella.

Amassing an exceptionally enormous collection that drew far too much attention, to me saying that, yet I wanted to live life, not death, for myself- that was the chance of a lifetime before I properly realized the risk, and then, I was wiped in tunneling, a beam of light, into this girl as her new soul.’

I- Melisa looks at her- beforehand from above, new heart crashing, with exhilaration, and butterflies. When I saw the image unfold in her head, it was too late to change my mind back, life as a prevailing life had started.

I- Naddalin, said, additionally, thought, and expressed that this was and is a complete death sentence.

‘And then there was a passion,’ I whisper, seeing violent, orange flames rise into a darkened sky.

‘Everything was destroyed.’ She nods. ‘With, for all appearances anyway, me.’

I suck in my breath, hold it some- and blow out my cheeks, meeting new eyes- in a world that I have not seen in years. I was unsure what to say, to them or even how to

react, interact, or even relate to humanity what-so-ever, or the lack of it, from what I could see by looking around, life was flaccid and next to dead.

‘And before they could even extinguish the flames, I was gone, running for my life.’

Traveling all over Europe, or what was left of it, I had seen photos of WW2 and what France looked like after having blood dripped on every inch or so-o, fleeing from place to place like a nomad, a gypsy, a tramp even- changing my name a few times, to hide for the police officers that would make misdemeanor and felony, over stand-up and having a thought in your head. I knew I had to get back to the US. And that was the next step yet- and I got on my first high-speed built-train- and steaked accursed the skies, at night, elevated 300 feet up over the dystopian cityscape- glowing in LEDs and neons.

‘Call me- Melisa now, I have not even had much time to think up a last name- yet, like it matters anyway. She Alleged... as confused as ever with her on identity and lost in the fact, she was a week to week starting over somewhere new.

Besides, until enough time had passed, and people started to forget, yet with them, it would not be hard to do, they were all losing their home, no work, and no money to be had- for any, the schools a joke... even more than in the past, I did not think it was possible, yet I was wrong, as usual.

Finally, settling in at Paris- was also a joke- my life’s wanting to have this was a pun, and I was made the ass- in the deal, where, as you know, we first met and, well, you know the rest.

But then again, this choice, I made was forever- or ‘till death, and then I go back for re-review of placement.’

All eyes look into my eyes- faded with no reason or buttressed thought, hurry up and wait, and a more the belligerent, aggressive, loud-mouthed, and quarrelsome, correspondingly, yet that is the stigma placed down on me.

I was adapting, wishing I did not have to say it- it is choosing- life over death, but knowing it is necessary to put it into words, somehow what I am seeing- I cannot- other than horrific, even though I already know what has come.

‘All of them are saying that at some point- not long from now you and I, will have to move- not a city to city, not state to state, not even continents, but worlds away, like never before.’

And the moment she says- ‘we’re going to all dice aren’t we,’ to a bunch of other girls her age- some did not even move or even blink; it was if they were in a trance, at this point they were all classed by age and size, and gender. It was freezing at night and blazing during the day.

I can hardly believe, I had not thought of it before, that I was going to make this trip, at some point.

I mean, it is so obvious that I had to be blasted to a new world to live, hiding right in plain sight, I was, and this new world was offering so much- I could not pass it up even if I were one of the first to make the move. Up till then, there was yet, a year, like-

before I could go, and the new worlds were still in their infancy- not even named yet- yet I was more than existed, thrilled, anxious and with the heebie-jeebies.

Also, yet somehow... I was able to ignore it- and take in these last days on this old world that was going to be no longer- and think I would be one of these people to live during this time of history being made.

I wonder what would be lost and what would be gained... In this new world, and if it would look anything like the one, I was momentarily left behind- forever. Think about it like 3 ½ billion years of life- gone in less than a year of it slowly dying and neglect.

QUESTIONS-

Increasingly more questions of wounded and thinking- the questions of possibilities.

...?...

LIFE AND WINSOME and then transferred- by us, to keep past wisdom. I even asked the question of if this was what happened 3 billion years ago- with Earth. And that was Adam and Eve, and God was the person to start a new Species?

-And-

Then the tree of life was the only thing to ensure it and the only thing brought over to the new plant, and the 7th day was a man, born... (and that was the light of the

new world,) I had a lot of questions and theories, all the madness. Yet, I put them all in my notes.

I need to stop thinking aloud... don't I?

The question of my child would be one of the first to populate this new world, that is if I would have a child, I am still young... many- many thoughts.

Look the other way, at this thought, would be madness also- I was looking at ads of the new Boeing X-38 pretending it would be different for me, I remember the past, and not liking short flight, now were spanning worlds- in manufactured aircraft. Which just shows you what denial can do.

'You probably won't age much past the- a year,' she continues- to hear the voices say.

My hand smooths my cheek.

'Trust us your trip will be out of this world,'

It went on to say- 'It won't be long before your friends start to notice, they do not want to live without you, tell them to make this trip with you- why don't you.'

...And the thought came, I have no friends here to say that to... or family, the thoughts of life without is not much of one, rushed through my head as fast as they add seeing the three-dimensional film video, going faster than the speed of light.'

Please... I smile, desperate to add a little lightness to the dark, heavy space.

~*~

(May, I remind girl- I was saying this in my mind,) you that we live in an orange and yellow world of death- pollution, and self-inflicted addiction disease? You stay here you are going to end up killed or dying with something unheard of...

A home where plastic surgery is practical- the norm! Everything is perfect, nobody ages there. Seriously- Nobody, we can carry on just as we are for the next hundred years!' It like the afterlife... and is becoming more like that every day, I wounded if death will be a thing in time to come?

I laugh, but when I look at Emmah, thanks to my power she respects me now too, see the way her eyes peer into mine- with love like when she was nine, it is clear the gravity of the situation trumps my small joke- that the other God has played on me.

'What do I tell Jaylynn?' I whisper, as Nevaeh, my little girl, sits beside me, slipping an arm around me and I am easing her fears like a small child, that I never had in the past to love. At last, I have my child back in my mothering arms, and my daughter respects me, as I should have without the hex of them, taking over my days and life- and even afterlife. And I have loved it... and all enemies have been exterminated.

I heard the bench in the center of the room plopping onto it, as I buried my face in my hands.

'I mean, it is not like I can fake my death. That crime-scene investigation stuff's a little more advanced than it was in your day.'

~*~

(Thoughts)

‘What do I tell Jaylynn?’ I- Emmah whispers, as Nevaeh sits beside me, happier than ever, slipping an arm around me and easing my fears- too, that she could have my life, by a flick of a pen.

‘I mean, it’s not like I can fake my death, she would know, and doing what the other girl did is a death entice, worse than death.’

That crime-scene investigation stuff’s a little more advanced than it was in your day- I say in the girl’s head, I have seen what it is now on Earth- and here it is about the same. These worlds become more alike every day.’

‘Odd those, could get away with murder and I can’t,’ and she giggles oddly to herself, knowing that she has the victory of getting just in time.

‘I wonder if there will be a need for an afterlife in some years to come, also?’ They were pondering their thoughts.

‘We’ll deal with it when the time comes,’ she says to us. ‘I’m sorry, I should’ve mentioned this all before, it takes up most of my time.’

We- Emmah and Jaylynn- nonetheless, when we look into her eyes, we know it would not have mattered, she wanted us to approve of her, so we did, out of fear- really- not loyalty. I am sure that others feel the same as we do, about everything too.

Would not have made the least bit of difference. Remembering all things past, the day when she first presented the whole idea of immortality to me- and being able to live in the 7 leaves of purgatory of the abyss- in this world, and others like Earth.

Like- how careful she was to explain, I was the one to make the choices to go up or down, fallen, or heavenly, that I would never cross the bridge- and know, I never been with my family again, that I was in control of my destiny, just as Naddalin becoming Melisa.

Nevertheless, I went for it anyway, saying 'I would be there for her any way I could...' as Jaylynn.

Pushed the thought right out of me. Figuring I would find a gap, determine a way to work around all of that- keen to convince myself of about anything if it meant being with her for perpetuity, and it is no different here and now.

Also, though I have no idea what I will say to Jaylynn, or how I will even begin to explain our sudden abandonment to our friends or now, I did back then, over the fact we had none, in the end, all I want is to be with her and forget the past and the remembers of all things that we are passed- it is giving me a headache. It is the only way my life feels complete though to surpass the memories of all things past- to have a future.

'We'll enjoy a good life, Eternally, I promise you that, I will make up for it to you both in a way possible.' She said to both of us with compassion.

You will never experience any shortage, and you will never be bored again. Not after realizing the magnificent possibilities of all that exists, if you believe.

Though aside from you and me- all our outside acquaintances will be extremely short-lived, the world we call Earth is dying- and become next to a hellish wasteland, I pulled out now before, there is war, on our own, I have chosen to see them off to new worlds, if they were on Earth, to be soldered, for the life that is going to become- there.

‘There is just no getting around it, no dodging like you think, Earth is DONE- it is fried, cooked even. It is a necessity, simple as that.’

I- Emmah, take a deep breath and nod, memorizing where I foremost met her and how she said something about being bad at farewells, I get why now- I think- I do.

I- Nevaeh, nonetheless, thought nothing of it, she is just Emmah, responding to my thoughts when she says, ‘I know, goodbye is never a thing with you.’

You would think it would get easier, right? No...! But it never really does; I usually find it soother to just disappear and avoid everything and anything altogether.’

‘Easier for you maybe, though, as Jaylynn- I’m not so sure about those you’ve left behind.’

I thought that was humorous, amusing, and funny in my mind thinking we have all been ‘LEFT BEHIND.’

‘Just like you, I know that you have, you can’t deny, you couldn’t deny the life that you lived, deny the anger that is inside of you, letting it out, letting it out.’

‘I stay strapped, with tournament, bitches, their lame, walk into the school, walking up to preps, I want to make a fool, I am so lame, and they’re so cool, I’ll drown their ass in the Barnesboro pool.’

‘You don’t want me to spit this hardcore, make a fancy drum score, with blood, still my redox, like mud, so I go back to my table, laugh at me like I am the lint of navel.’

‘Get up in the mooring to see the old man snoring, just to go to school, and see my friends- snooze more than me and score, you know, I had no car, I knew- I was no gangster, I knew it was not hard, attest it was funny, making my nose blood and runny.’

‘Let us see what reject is next on my list. To break their freaking wrist, make a fist and shove them in their locker, like a regular dork, that like chick-rock, yet they do not think I would do such a crime, I am a nerd that has been left behind.’

‘You hate me, and I hate you, and you don’t know what I have been thinking, and you get love and I get hate, don’t ask for- forgiveness, it’s too late.’

‘Think about all the people that you made cry, think about all that you’ve left behind, and if you feel that you have been left behind for years, and you never realized piss on the world, no one gives a shit.’

‘You can do anything if you put your mind to it, don’t let the prep hit your brain and make you insane, don’t let yourself fade away, take the AK- and spray for fame... they don’t want to mess with this name, they don’t want any heat, steep in the boxing ring, just put on your cheerleader pompoms, with spicy sauce jockstraps...’

‘...Your riches are all just bitches, I had no money, and that is what it is like to be poor; to be razed by a hippy or a press pill poppa and a Heroin- hoe, I developed through this water... and it grows bigger as I got older, preps- jocks, hitting anybody that steep on the block... hating the preps with their Polo shirts and matching socks, and then the hate and haters only got bigger...’

‘Hey, like- I thought we were all the same. Yeah- well I said, Freak that- and I pulled the trigger.’

‘What good is it if it will never change, one death won’t change a world-mind, I’ll be another left behind- or suicide.’

~*~

She nods, rising from the bench and pulling me up alongside her, saying your words will be seen by this world. Not to still but to help all that have been like you.

‘I’m a vain and selfish woman, what can I say?’

‘“Maybe- just bitter, or crazy...” your words, not mine- right?’

‘You have Asperger’s Syndrome, don’t you?’ Says Emmah.

‘Likely... yet never proven.’

The test I did said this- ‘Your score was 24 out of a possible 50. Scores in the 0-25 range indicate few or no Autistic traits.’ Odd missed it by one point, yet that also has been my life, I have an IQ of 154 too, said some, yet that was never proven either.’

‘That’s not what I meant-’ I shake my head. ‘I just-’ ‘please.’

She looks at me... ‘There is no need to defend me. I know what I am- or at least what I used to be.’

She gets up, leading me away from the paintings she came here to see, this. Only, I am not ready to go.

Not yet... Anyone who is stripped of their greatest passion just simply walked away like she has, deserves a second chance.

I let go of her hand and shut my eyes tightly, establishing a large canvas, a wide selection of brushes, a comprehensive palette of paints, and whatever else she might need before she can stop me, I say paint, what you think this new world would be like, and if it is that good, I may use it.

‘What’s the idea here?’

She gazes between the easel and me.

Saying- ‘I am a God, after all, I can make worlds happen and dreams come true or shatter them in a blink of my eyes.’

‘Wow, it has been a long time if you can’t even distinguish the tools of the trade.’

I smile some...

She then peers at me, gazing intensely, unwavering, but I meet it with equal strength.

Someday I would be taking her place, I knew... I knew- I would.

‘I thought it might be enjoyable for you to paint alongside your friends. ...All of you...’

I shrug, watching as she grabs a brush from the table, turning it over in the palm of her hand.

‘You said we could do anything we want, right?’

‘Yeap!’ Said Nevaeh

That the normal rules no longer apply, and we can make this world as we wish? On the canvas you have complete freedom, wasn’t that the point of the trip, also for this girl?’

‘Yeap, see you’re getting me...’ Said, Nevaeh.

She looks at me, expression wary but yielding, her new world depends on you and your imaginations, not mine, that why I am out of it- totally- and completely and do not have blame.

‘So-o you have become God to these new worlds?’ asked Jaylynn.

‘Um-hum,’ was the reply.

‘Then if that’s the circumstance, then I think you should paint something, it is after all your worlds, to them, and your people.’

‘So, what the religion...?’ It was asked curiously by mostly all in the room.

‘Ha- I don’t know that yet either, or if there is even going to be one, all that makes is hate, simple-minds, and war.’

‘Create something beautiful, grand, everlasting, whatever you want. And as soon as you are finished, we will mount it alongside your friends. Leaving it unsigned, of course.’

‘I’m far past the point of needing my work to be recognized,’ she says hastily, looking at me, eyes filled with light, bright blue in shade.

‘Good,’ I nod, signaling toward the blank canvas. ‘Then I expect to see a work of pure inspired genius with self-image involved.’ All you girl has made these new worlds as you paint them, there all refitting you, my chosen devotee girls of 14 called the ‘Kannattajat’ of strength and wisdom, remember that...

Just beforehand, they all had their hand on her shoulder, they all dropped their heads with eyes closed- muttering in trances, think hard about your world, you are going to make, Nevaeh giving a nudge- to replace, and they had their ideas. ‘You should probably get started though girls; the night is limited.’

I glimpsed between the painting, palm pressed to my chest- just like theirs, at a complete loss for words, at what I was seeing.

Knowing whatever I say could never- ever define what is before me.

Absolutely no words will do at all- I am at a loss.

‘It’s so-o’ I pause, feeling small, undeserving, unquestionably- not worthy of an image so- magnificent, superb, wonderful, splendid, glorious, brilliant, majestic, grand, royal, outstanding, regal, noble, and honorable.

‘It’s so beautiful- and transcendent- and’ I shake my head-’ and on no account is that me!’

She laughs, eyes meeting mine when she says, ‘Oh it’s you all right.’ Smiling as she is taking it all in.

‘In fact, it is the personification of all your incarnations. A sort of compilation of you of the last four hundred years, of what would be perfection. Your hair and creamy skin hailing straight from your life in Amsterdam- like the life that is now walking these worlds, strong, yet feminine, and full of life, yet unemotional in places to remember hardship, your confidence and conviction from your past days, your unpretentiousness and inner *métier* was taken from your difficult life.’

Your elaborate dress show like wrapped within the grounds, in a way, and flirtatious gaze lifted straight from your humanity days, while the eyes themselves- blue like the cloudless days.’

She shrugs at me, turning toward me, saying and the nights are as warm as you all to me.

‘They remain the same, it would be wonderful, yet I am going to let them change this world to their liking, static is not life, undying either, no matter what semblance you wear- it always changing, as it should.’

‘And now, you must turn it over to them, and already there is a war, on one that I am not going to stop, as you all know, yet Earthlings are taking what is not theirs here... so-o.’

I whisper, gaze focused on the canvas, taking in the most radiant, glorious, luminous, winged creature- a true goddess descending from the heavens above, eager to bestow the new Earth called SKOUFYCEOL, with her gifts, she gives in just living.

Knowing it is quite possibly the most beautiful image I have ever seen, but still not getting how it could be me, that they are reflecting.

‘What part of me is taken from now?

Other than the eyes, I mean, and then I let it all in, even remembering parts of me that I could not evoke were still there.’

‘Emmah has the new world of SKOUFYCEOL, like earth yet, now at all-almost done, even if war is to come on it.’

‘Why... your delicate wings, of course.’

I turn, assuming she is ever-so jokey until I see the stern expression motif her face.

‘You’re quite cataleptic of them, I know.’

She nods some to me.

Nevaeh- ‘Nonetheless, have faith in me, they are there. Having you in my life is like a gift from above- even if, a gift I surely- do not deserve, but one I give thanks for every day, even if I was pushed away.’

‘Please, like- like- I’m hardly that good-or kind-or splendid- or even remotely angelic like you seem to think.’ Said Emmah.

I shake my head, saying ‘that why I chose you for this... you’re showing it now.’

‘You sure about the- everything?’

She glances at her beautiful unsigned painting and those of her friends.

‘Unquestionably.’ She then nods. ‘Imagine all the bedlam that will result when they find it professionally framed and mounted on the wall, and then you can reach in and go there, as it spins, in real-time.

‘...Like doors of perception?’

...?...

‘Kinda!’

And I mean the good kind of revolution.

Besides, just think of all the people who will be called upon to study them, trying to determine just where it came from, how it got here, and who could have created it.’

She nods, glancing at it one last time before turning away, saying I hope this is good. But I grabbed her hand and pulled her back to me, saying, ‘Stop saying negatives, this is what you would see. Remember when- you were unable to?’

-And-

They like you to see it through eyes that well see it in diverse ways too.

Don’t you think we should rename it? She questioned, you know, add a little figurine like the name to it, like the other ones should have also?’

She glances at her watch, more than a little distracted now, that I have nothing to do with- it is up to the living lives to do that.

‘I’ve never been much good at titling my work, always just went with the obvious, anyway.’

Like Ted for the stuffed brown bear, and bunny for the stuffed pink rabbit.

‘Well, it is better not to name it Ever with Wings, Angelic Ever, or anything remotely like that anyway.

I tilted my head and gazed at her, determined to do the work for her they had chosen.

‘Any references to why they went with this?’

‘Yes, the past man from their world, of leaders called presidents, before your time, and even mine, and some after my death too.’ She spoke.

She looks at me briefly, before she gazes begins to wander, to other things- with fascination.

‘How about- enchanted – or even enchantment - or- I do not know, something like enthralled?’ I press my lips tightly together- as I let it go, thinking the same thing yet, roles are roles.

‘Enchantment?’ She turns toward me, saying we can subtitle them underneath the names given by them.

‘Well, we are obviously under spelling- by you are we not? Like- if you think that bears a resemblance to us.’

I laugh, watching her eyes light up as she laughs along with me, saying, and that is why your world is the one it is too, and you do not even see it as I do.

‘Allure it is also known as planet Triumph.’ She nods yes, I would say that fits you and your world that you have made, back to business again, is what that one is all about. ‘But we need to make the inscription quick- I’m afraid we- have already done that too.’

We nod, closing our eyes and envisioning the plaque in my head, whimpering- about the wonders we see ahead. ‘What should I use for the artist-anonymous or unknown?’

‘Either’ she says, voice hurried, apprehensive, eager to move on choosing unidentified because I like the sound of it, I lean forward to inspect my work, asking, ‘What do you think?’

She grasps my hand and pulls me alongside her, moving so fast my feet never once touched the ground.

Sprinting down the long series of halls, taking the stairs as though they are not even there.

The entry door is just within view when the whole room goes bright, and the alarm begins to sound.

‘Oh my!’ They all cry, alarm crowding my throat as she picks up the pace.

Voice hoarse and scruffy when she says, ‘I didn’t plan this being this way- I hope you all like this,’ she said to the crowds- within the auditorium, discontinuing as we reach the stage.

I turn to her, body rolling on the inside, skin slick with sweat, aware of the footsteps behind us, the shouts ringing out- of expectancy. Standing wordlessly beside her, unable to move, unable to shriek, her eyes closed in deep concentration, urging the complex spell to make the world happen in the sour system.

But it is too late to change anything now. They are already here, and they are all ready to move, the time has come.

So, I raise my arms in renunciation, of what was to come with this one world- to another, ready to accept my fate- and theirs,' I am yanked out the door and toward the blooming fields around the school- in relief.

Or at least I projected the school ideas into the new world to become, I thought.

Emmah intended ever-so-carefully in the most important ensconced thoughts of her design, heading toward her new home, within the village. A gift from being one of the chosen, that the others did not know about yet.

She could see the future, like- then so, we find ourselves in the middle of a busy highway instead- a slew of speeding cars honking and skidding as we scramble to our feet and hurry to the side, gazing all around and catching our breath as we try to determine where we are. 'It is going to become industries, in some undetermined location, falling all over us. I am sure of it, in ways that I could not even dream.'

I say this, glancing at the new home and breaking into a laugh so contagious; it gets silly. All of us huddled in the same devilment, and so untrusting to the girl that it made it all happen, even mocking her, and looking at; on the side of a litter-strewn thoroughfare.

'How's that for breaking out of a furrow?' I thought.

I almost had a panic attack back there- I thought for sure we would- have something for this, yet I never thought it would be like this. I catch myself snorting and shaking my head. I gasp at the inside of this new home, shoulders shaking remembering the lingering of all our pasts and the remembrance of all that was previous and lingering.

‘Didn’t I promise- I’d always look after you and keep you from harm?’ A hand pinned note said, as she was reading, just moments before hands it was sitting on the furor table.

I nod, remembering the words, but unfortunately, the last few minutes are still etched on my brain.

‘How about a car then? A car would be good about now, don’t you think?’

Every one of them heads the newest, and the best- within this world.

‘Can you even imagine what those guards thought when first given the rights to look over me- and the others, us the cars, and the home alike, always surrounded by five-man, as if celebrity- star.’

The door opens without me pushing it, and insuring me in, adding- was a voice within the room and in my head- soft yet hunting- keeping me on time- and logged, ‘The security cameras like a strip around the room was the best in this world!’ Before closing my eyes and taking care of them too, I say thank you to my God who is a woman, just like me, and that inside of us all is that kind of power.

...God- is a woman...!

~*~

(Early the next morning.)

Ten minutes early in fact.

(Then it happened back on earth...)

The end, not of the story- but theirs... if they did not make the movie off Earth.

That day... it was chosen what Earth would become now that it was next to inhalable.

Portion

(Courtroom)

‘Impressions, what does that mean?’

‘What do they stand for, and why do they ever-so need rights? Life or robot life to imitate it- that is made as human even having feelings that would support the fact of having a soul. What defines a being, individual, soul, even creature? As a person or life, or living? What defines possessions, properties, belongings, even stuff?’

‘What is the variance, change, dissimilar, or even the discrepancy of medication? Personhood what is the anthropologist and ethicist arguing that all those standards for... self-awareness included, to understand with the ability too, and having emotions of complexity... and capacity, with volume, and measurements for empathy.’

‘We’re all-in contract, agreement, promise, covenant, and even treaty, that
Impression is now considered not life, and not have the same rights as human life.’

Rolling by the judge- ‘Impression is now equal to all human, by USA law.’

(The gavel smacks!)